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# GOD, CHRIST AND PAGAN



M. I. BOAS, M.D., PH.D.

# God, Christ and Pagan

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## INTRODUCTION

THE word pagan has little real meaning for most of us today. When we hear it pronounced it affects most of us in a way that has been determined by our schoolbooks, that is, we have a vision of the gods on Olympus, a group of bearded Druids gathered around some woodland altar, or worse — the holocausts to Moloch and the abominations of Ashtoreth. Examples such as these fall into that variety of religious, or so-called religious, practice we instinctively regard as pagan, but if we go a step farther and try to differentiate them from what we have come to think of as religion, paganism proves to be something else, with the difference lying not so much in the outer aspects and manifestations as in the essence of the thing. The pagan principle, it turns out, may be only loosely related to specific acts or practices; it proves to be much more deeply seated, more intrinsic in man, a thing timeless, universal.

Pagan, it should be quickly added, is hardly to be limited to what is rude, backward and unlettered, for the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, pagans all, illuminated humanity with the clarity of their thought, the wonders of their art, and the nobility of their ethics and sentiments. When we call these people pagans we simply mean that their belief was polytheistic in contrast to our own religions which are identified with monotheism, a distinction which is debatable, if not absolutely incorrect. Again pagan must be distinguished from the common usage which makes it synonymous with 'heathen', for heathen taken literally also means rude, uncultivated. As a preliminary definition it is better to say that by pagans we mean those who seek to realize their fundamental needs by an appeal to supernatural forces and undertake this appeal according to magical formulae or supernaturally ordained codes of law and ritual.

At first glance this seems to include the greater part of mankind, and we can only exclude ourselves with any assurance when it is our *everyday needs* and wishes that are concerned. When our *fundamental needs* are at stake we, too, appeal to supernatural forces, and *a priori* it would be safer to recognize that humanity has not changed automatically and completely, either with respect to its basic needs or its notions of how to cope with those needs, simply because 'religion' in our special modern sense of the word has made its appearance in human society.

Nor is the difference between the religious man and the pagan likely to be found in any lack of devotion or seriousness on the

part of the latter, for we know that many 'pagans' went about their religious life very seriously, as indeed some still do, and history records many highly developed and cultivated souls — an Ikhnaton, a Marcus Aurelius, a Virgil — who were devoted to their religious ideas and whom we must still regard as pagan. We cannot possibly say such men had no religion, but we still feel that a demarcation line can be traced, and in tracing it we come to another and closer definition. Paganism, we may say, is a primitive way of attaining goals through pre-ordained mechanisms; the hope to realize fundamental needs through the accomplishment of certain well defined and *immutable* acts.

Religion, certainly, is something else. The pagan believes he has done everything when he faithfully accomplishes the prescribed acts according to the prescribed rules. In contrast to this the aim of the religious man is to *be* what he thinks he *must be*. From that point of view it is logical that there should have been truly religious men in pagan times, and pagans aplenty in the world of today.

Religion, in this sense, has always existed, or at least, has tried to establish itself. In every society, even the most primitive, there is a tendency to detach oneself from traditions and laws which have become mere mechanisms. The eventual consciousness on the part of a few of the sterility of paganism, of the enslavement to established rules that it imposes, and in consequence the obstacle it is for all progress, tends to create 'religion' inside the pagan culture itself.

Whenever and wherever great minds emerge there is a substitution of ideas for mechanisms. A higher approach to the god or gods establishes itself along with a higher morality and a higher aim in life, but even so the old 'pagan' approach to the satisfaction of basic needs and wishes persists in the great mass of individuals and presently reasserts itself forcing an exchange of ideas for mechanisms again.

The teaching of the historical Jesus and of primitive Christianity repudiated everything that was even remotely connected with mechanism in religious thinking. It demanded a complete renewal of feeling and of practice, a cleansing of the temple in fact; it identified the Pharisee, the man bound by rule and by custom, with the hypocrite. However, the paganistic reaction was inevitable. As soon as the last man who had seen Jesus, the last man who had experienced the original fervour of the movement was dead, the adaptation of Christianity to paganistic thinking began, and the infiltration of Christianity by paganism was already well under way by the time the gospels were committed to writing.

Before the ink was dry exegesis began, the wise searching for the original meanings in the midst of a maze of obscurities, the paganistic type of mind hunting for authority for its attitudes.

In our modern world the conditions of these early days would seem to have changed. Both scholars and theologians are research men who avail themselves of all the tools of modern science, but even so each is subject to tendencies inherent in his methods and his objectives. When either approaches the interpretation of obscure gospel passages his special viewpoint is apt to show through, and this can be said without detracting in any way from the useful results research has certainly accomplished.

The scholar, for instance, in almost any book about the gospels begins with a survey of first-century life in Palestine, the world in which Jesus lived. The currents of thought then prevalent, the character of the popular sects, the religious ideas and beliefs of the society to which Jesus was addressing his teaching, all these are considered first, and then on the basis of what has been presented the writer proceeds to his interpretations of the texts.

This is the method most scholars have employed, and incontestable merits it has, but even so its limitations are apparent. In their eagerness to reconcile the texts with the contemporary material available, philologists, archaeologists, anthropologists alike have the tendency to overlook, or even to ignore, those underlying ideas the texts so frequently betray, especially the antipaganistic spirit of the original teaching, and again the intrusions in which the pagan point of view appears again.

The theologian has difficulties of his own. Although traditionally he holds out against the 'scientific approach', seeking thereby to be rid of the problems history forces upon him, he goes to another extreme. He wishes to ignore the whole question of what people were thinking and believing at the moment Jesus appeared so that he may concentrate his whole attention on the time-transcending questions of immortality, salvation and morals which he finds posed in the gospel texts. In his zeal to serve humanity and teach religion at its best, he gives in to a simplification which has proven even more disastrous to the quest of truth than all the shortcomings of the scientific method. Nor is this tendency limited to the theological world alone. The great body of believers who read the Bible privately and make up their own versions of the obscure passages fall into the same trap. It is the tendency, present in most of us, to identify human law with divine command, the desire to find confirmation in the sacred texts for what we subjectively believe to be good, to find sanction for our own moral attitudes, convictions and practices.

Having seen how Hammurabi received the tables of the law from Marduk, and Moses the ten commandments from Yahveh, it is not surprising that we in our Christian world should try to connect each law, each ethical or moral maxim, each general rule of propriety, with some pronouncement of Jesus. In our moral world Jesus' word stands for 'what must be'. When we as individuals fight for our freedom, or as a nation for our principles of life, we tell ourselves, and we like to believe, that we are fighting for 'the concepts of right and justice that God's son expounded to the world'.<sup>1</sup> This habit of thought is so deeply implanted that we will not admit that our everchanging concepts of right and justice can hardly accord in every particular with a teaching laid down for all time. Our interpretations of scripture tend to confirm the order of things which is considered good in our day, and this urge is so strong among the best-intentioned commentators and preachers that they frequently force their interpretations. It is because such men have not hesitated at one time or another to recast the more difficult passages, changing a word here, making a small rearrangement, a slight alteration there, that passages cryptic to begin with have now become utterly obscure.

If we are to recapture the original meanings it would seem best to recognize from the beginning that many passages in the gospels are not concerned with moral questions at all. In these passages the theme is not how man should deal with his fellows, what his place in society should be, or what is socially good or bad, but rather this — what can religion do for a man, what should it and what should it not offer him, and even more important, how can he deal with God. Even the superficial reader of the gospels can hardly fail to see that interspersed with the messianic passages, and even with those dealing with Christ's nature and his role as man's saviour, there is the other and ever-recurring theme we have already indicated, the one concerned primarily with man's exploitation and misuse of religion.

The average reader may be reasonably familiar with the main religious forces at work in Jesus' day, with the thinking and doctrines of the leading sects, Pharisee, Sadducee and Essene; on the other hand he tends to ignore the religious attitudes of the first-century man-in-the-street, the individual to whom Jesus' teaching was most certainly addressed. He hardly reflects on how this illiterate man prayed and sacrificed, what he was hoping to obtain from his god and how he expected his religious activities to accomplish this for him. Still less does the reader stop to consider what part of these instinctive, unavowed, half-conscious notions

<sup>1</sup> From an address by a recent President of the U.S.

may still linger in his own heart, constituting for him a heritage of which he is hardly even aware.

Once he focuses his attention in this direction, he may find that many of Jesus' words had an aim which went above and beyond the traditionally accepted teaching. He may even conclude that many words and parables were aimed directly at this practice of making religion and religious precepts a tool for man's private use, at man's innate wish to find divine prescriptions which flatter his hopes and soothe his fears. It is even possible that he will discover that these same words and parables have a meaning more sustaining and inspiring than anything to be had from the all too convenient interpretations commonly presented.

Before we come to Christianity itself, we will try to sketch some of these primitive pseudo-religious ideas. Our first chapter illustrates the methods man has employed and still employs to assure himself divine co-operation, and briefly considers that hidden part of our being — the insufficiently known and incompletely explored, *homo religiosus*.





PART I



## CHAPTER 1

# Homo Religiosus

### WHAT MAN SEEKS IN RELIGION

It is commonplace to say that the fear of death is the most real, if not the only, factor which draws man to religion.

Death breaks in irrationally on the otherwise well-ordered course of life. It presents itself as an intruder; it takes us by surprise since it has no natural place in our scheme of things; it is foreign to our habits and calculations, foreign to our desires and endeavours, foreign to everything man stands and lives for.

In order to bring this utterly discordant note into harmony with the rest of our notions, life must be conceived in terms which account for death, which make death appear as a rational development, as the culminating event of man's years on earth, or better yet, life must be conceived in terms which re-interpret the fact of death, and efface its bitterness.

Now it may well be that the prime motive that forces man to religion is this need for an answer to the question of how to face death, or rather how to face it without apprehension, but a closer examination will soon show that this need is far from being the only one that brings man to his altars. For example the fear of death, strong in the older age groups, hardly exists among the young, and yet religion, especially among primitive people, takes as strong a hold upon the young as it does upon their elders. What is more, certain religions have disregarded the problem of death entirely; they never discuss it, and the after-life is hardly mentioned in their sacred books. Judaism, for one, never attempts to soften the reality of death. In the old texts death is pictured as supremely terrible, the worst of punishments, greatest of evils, an evil which virtuous living and faith in the Eternal may delay but cannot abolish. Nevertheless religion was never more alive than in the Judaic world. Religion played the same dominant part in everyday Jewish life that it plays today in the everyday life of certain primitive societies which also treat the problem of death as secondary in their religious systems.

Even if one grants that religion in one aspect is the answer to man's hope of evading death, it is also true that from the dawn of consciousness man has hoped, perhaps even more fervently and

certainly more constantly, that through religion, or other means, he could 'better himself' here and now, that he could improve, 'do something for himself' during his sojourn on earth. Instinctively he feels that a method exists which put to use can make him grow in strength and value, that the proper acts constantly repeated can enlarge his capabilities and thereby make him better situated to survive and to dominate his environment.

Face to face with this environment man realizes that he is helpless, weak and blind, powerless before a thousand dangers which assail him. Moreover, he recognizes that alone and unaided he is incapable of realizing the ends which seem necessary for even a minimum of well-being. Continuously he is dominated by fear and uncertainty, and in consequence he casts about for the talisman that will preserve him and bring him on safer ground, the talisman he is convinced exists.

Actually, this conviction, this unshakable belief, is the thing on which religion is based. The problem is merely how to find the talisman. Whole ages have passed during which religion was nothing more than a system for obtaining the use of this talisman, and for the majority of humans, religion is little more than that today.

If we examine this a little more closely, we will see that it really includes two beliefs, not one: first, that somewhere a magical 'formula' exists which man can lay hold on and thereby assure himself of happiness; and second, that supernatural 'beings' exist who possess and can dispense or withhold all those powers man himself lacks.

Anthropologists have not been able to decide which of these concepts first seized upon man's mind, and it is very possible that they are so interwoven as to be inseparable, and in that sense identical. From a practical standpoint it makes little difference in any case. If a man believes that a power exists that can give him happiness, he will almost certainly believe, in principle, that it is within his capacity to obtain the help of this power, to find the formula to command it. Were it not for this, man would have no reason to care whether mysterious powers existed or not. His faith in the existence of such powers and in his ability to make them subservient of his own wishes is the projection of his instinctive feeling of capability, that feeling which goes with youth and the sensation of being alive. Life is hardly imaginable without this belief that betterment is possible, and possible in a degree exceeding everything men can hope to accomplish by themselves. It is from this innate optimism that religion has been born.

## HOW PRIMITIVE RELIGION SATISFIES MAN'S AIMS

Salomon Reinach once wrote that it is by magic that mankind takes the offensive against the world. 'He begins to command the spirits, and believes that they will obey. Science is born when this illusion begins to be a reality and though the beginning of science is the end of the magical art, science itself could never have been born without this ancestry.'

The new-born child — like the animal in all probability — thinks in magical terms, satisfying its wishes by what is for it a magical technique. Shouting brings food. Shouting also conjures away wet diapers, cold feet and various other discomforts. The jungle man acts in much the same way; he shouts, dances, beats on tomtoms, and is convinced he benefits thereby; he does not vary his methods to adapt them to experience; neither does he come to know the gods on whom he depends by any logical process of search and gradual ascertainment. From the start he believes that whatever happens, happens according to certain well-established rules, these being the will of the divine powers; consequently all his actions are dictated by this belief, and he is certain that no action of his own will achieve its end, will ever be 'blessed', unless the intercession of these powers is assured. He is also convinced of the sanctity of tradition and of the powers that go with grey hair. Childbirth is the province of old women, even if these women are stupid and dirty, and for the rest, he knows in advance what causes the sickness of his child, what causes the drought that ravages his crop, and what ritual act will assure him victory in the coming battle.

Recovery for the sick, successful invocation of the rain-gods, help in battle, all these are obtained, and believed to be obtainable, by well-established methods none of which are subject to empirical evaluation or correction. No question is to be raised as to their efficiency; variations conforming to their results are rarely to be permitted.

In case the orthodox ceremony does not turn out well — if a man dies, if a warrior is defeated — the failure is not attributed to its logical causes, much less to the inefficiency of the ceremony as such; failure is always the result of some deviation from the accepted ritual or of a violation of one or another taboo. In America right up to the end of the Indian wars many Indians continued to believe themselves to be invulnerable to bullets and that they would fall victim to them only if they transgressed some taboo. When Roman Nose, the Cheyenne chief, went into battle after eating meat which had been lifted from a kettle with an iron

fork, his subsequent death was attributed to this sin and not to the bullet that cut him down.

Theoretically, science diverges from sorcery when the conviction arises that a specific evil must be countered by a specific act, and even savages may be 'scientific' in this sense, at least to some degree. Although their methods have little to do with empiricism, some of these methods are based on a dim perception of cause and effect. Observation of nature and the discovery of causal links are certainly at the root of many magical procedures, and many primitive attempts to cope with evil and to realize wishes turn out to be effective to some extent; we need only recall ritual washings and purifications, the isolation of the sick, restrictions on certain foods, exogamy, to name only a few.

But even though new 'scientific' methods are found, man never willingly parts with his old system. Whenever the danger is sufficiently great, he falls back into his old ways — into habits of thought and reactions so deeply rooted, so much a part of the human soul, that they crop up again and again in all ages and all countries. Civilized thinking gives way. To ward off great misfortune ordinary measures will not suffice; great deeds must be undertaken, great sacrifices offered. The king of Moab besieged in his royal city sacrifices his oldest son on the wall of the town, and even in societies far more advanced than those described in the Book of Kings, despair tends to roll back the experience of centuries. Livy notes with horror that his fellow citizens resorted to human sacrifice during the panic which swept Rome following the defeat at Cannae in 216 B.C., and even as late as 97 B.C. the senate felt it necessary to enact a measure outlawing such proto-historic practices. Modern times have also seen scaffolds erected at moments of national danger and the secret purpose of many a memorable trial was to secure the ceremonial death of some great public figure. Such a sacrifice seemed necessary to restore the spirit of the people.

Today science has displaced magic for coping with evil and averting misfortune, at least in great areas of human activity; yet we can be sure of this — science can never achieve all that man originally expected from his divinities. It can never make him sure of his ground: it can never make him safe, except in some small degree. Innumerable dangers remain; natural enemies have been replaced by others, more cruel, more implacable, and in this respect modern man is no better off than his primitive ancestor. Actually primitive man is too realistic to be satisfied with methods which insist on specific procedures as remedies for specific evils. For him 'science' is not enough. What he seeks is a more general form of

protection, one which will make him safe in *all* situations, and so turning his back on empiricism he makes his demand on religion.

It has always been the secret aim of religious man to clothe himself in magic armour, or better still, to change his substance, or add to his substance in such manner that he becomes immune to evil, invulnerable. Deep in his heart man always considers himself sick, and in consequence is for ever seeking to correct this unhealthy state — to make himself hale, healed, whole, holy.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, from the moment man evolved to the point where he became conscious of his precarious state of misery and misfortune, the hunt has been pursued, now for the stone of wisdom, again for the secret elixir, or for the golden fruit or flower that exists somewhere beyond his reach. Gilgamesh seeks in the underworld for the miraculous plant, Heracles travels to the islands of the west to lay hold on the golden apples of the Hesperides, and Jason receives from Medea the unguent which protects him against sword and fire. The prize bears with it the powers of life; possession will endow the owner with such virtue, such strength — such supernatural strength — that he will be beyond the reach of all malignant powers, proof against all maladies and misfortunes, and supreme in every phase of life.

#### HOW MAN APPROPRIATES DIVINE POWER

Primitive man never doubts that power is the monopoly of divinity, that power is even the essence of divinity and even more specifically that divinity is in fact identical with power. Strength is not an ordinary quality that can be obtained in ordinary fashion; strength is a holy thing, and he who is strong is by that fact holy, that is to say, protected. Conversely, the holy man is one endowed with strength and power, with powers which not only defy all ordinary dangers and rout all enemies of ordinary strength, but also surpass in degree the possibilities available to ordinary beings. In other words, the holy man is automatically a healer, a seer, a prophet.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Originally all these words stood for the same fundamental notion. The old English word *halig*, or *haelig*, corresponds with the middle German *helig* which means consecrated, dedicated. The term then changed into *holy-hole-hooly-wholy*, all of which related to *hails*, *hal*, meaning free from injury, whole, hale. *Heil* in OHG means health, happiness, good luck. In its pre-Christian connotation the word designed something that must be preserved whole, intact — and is the equivalent of the Latin *sanctus* or *sacer*.

<sup>2</sup> When Hitler moved to the front during one phase of the Battle of the Bulge, he was called the German army's secret weapon. 'His mere presence would rout the Americans' (Guderian), very much as the presence of Pope Leo turned back Attila's Huns before Rome.



It is quite natural that man should first try to acquire these divine powers directly, that he should introduce into his own body the sources of power and energy, trusting that by direct assimilation their substance will be added to his own. Eating a lion makes one strong; eating the heart of a hero gives one courage. Even clothing oneself in the lion's skin may be enough to endow the wearer with the beast's powers and virtues, but food is the great giver of strength, and the act of eating is always something very much like a sacrament to primitive man. Naturally he regards food that is especially nourishing or is known to confer special strength, as something of special virtue, and hence highly desirable. Since the virtue the eater seeks to acquire for himself is certainly derived at the expense of its previous owner and this owner himself once possessed certain elements of divinity, the act of eating such substances is a highly dangerous one. This, however, does not deter the soul hungry for power. He proceeds with his feast but at the same time is careful enough to perform certain precautionary acts which are designed to placate the injured party.

In primitive societies the finest ears of wheat, the fruit of especially valued trees and the flesh of powerful animals are all more or less taboo. That does not mean that they are not eaten. On occasion they are, but at such times they are always handled with strict care and according to precisely established formulas by men who because of their own holiness are in direct communication with the indwelling anima of the tabooed object. In fact most 'healing' or sanctifying rituals, in civilized as well as primitive societies, are connected with eating, eating that must be done in ceremonial fashion in order that the fortifying power may be had without imperilling the eater. This belief — handed down from generation to generation — is crystallized in the special sense given to the word *educatio*, by the Romans for whom it meant the teaching of the art of eating.

Eating meat, that strongest of foods, and even more especially eating meat obtained at the expense of some dangerous form of animal life, has always been considered a different matter from the more or less safe consumption of ordinary vegetable foods. The life which has been taken away may be resentful and turn aggressor. By the same line of reasoning the flesh of a warrior killed in battle could be eaten only with great risk. But originally all meat was killed in some sort of battle and the flesh eaten was the flesh of an enemy, and it is probable that the lingering memory of this eating of one's victims accounts for the reluctance and solemnity with which we eat any unfamiliar variety of meat. The

more powerful the slain enemy has been, the more precarious its consumption is considered to be, and the more extensive the propitiation has to be.

One result of this is that very strong — sacred — foods are best eaten in company, preferably in the presence of the magician or priest, the man best able to placate any hostile powers. We today think it wrong for a man to consume a bottle of whisky alone in his room; it is simply 'not done'; but it is perfectly all right if he drinks it in company and with appropriate convivial ceremonies. It is the same case with the tribesman who devours a sacred animal, a holy plant or a slain enemy in secret thereby committing a sin calculated to provoke the wrath of the offended divinities, a wrath which may strike either at him or at the clan *in toto*.<sup>1</sup> We shall have more to say on this later.

In spite of these dangers man has never hesitated to sanctify himself by every means within his reach and on every possible occasion. The temptation to kill a divinity, or a being considered as belonging to the province of the divine, a totemic animal for example, or a king or a priest, is ever present, for such an act cannot fail to provide the killer with great virtue and strength: such an act is supremely 'healing'. Any dignitary, any person invested with more than ordinary power, is bound to be the object of general envy, and in primitive times such men lived under the continual threat of being slaughtered — and eventually eaten. As societies advance this last act, the consumption of the victim, is abolished, but easily recognizable substitutes for his body — either animal or human — are put to ceremonial use. During the feast which followed an Assyrian victory the head of the defeated king was fastened to the wall where it remained in full view of the celebrants.

For this same reason saints have never been entirely safe from the 'reverence' of the mob during their lifetime. Their hair, nails, even their excrement, were so highly regarded for their 'healing properties' that they were avidly hoarded. During the last years of his life Francis of Assisi frequently had to defend himself so eager were his congregations to lay hands on everything associated with his person. Before he died his relics were already being bought and sold much as medicine is bought and sold today, and the

<sup>1</sup> An echo of this tradition can be found in Joshua 7, 19-26, where Achan secretly appropriates certain spoils of the enemy, ignoring the rule that such spoils must be declared and be passed through the fire by the high priest. The Israelites' subsequent defeat was traced back to this sin and Achan, along with his sons and daughters, and even his beasts, were stoned and burned with fire. Victory ensued.

few utensils he had used were divided in advance, just as Jesus' garments were divided. Any person of exalted status is in some degree subject to this same threat. When the Princess de Lamballe was done to death during the September massacres of 1791, the Parisian mob tore open the body. Usually this is described as an act of pure barbarity, yet there is more than a hint that the underlying purpose was to take possession of the dead woman's 'powers'; at any rate one man went so far as to eat her heart raw.<sup>1</sup> In most modern instances a priest or king is simply divested of his robe and crown — his powers — instead of being beheaded, or perhaps killed and eaten as he would have been in an earlier age. But the underlying idea is the same, and in that earlier age the most extensive propitiations had also to be undertaken before the dead man's virtues could be taken over by his slayers. Hence the ceremony with which cannibals eat their victims, or the scrupulous legality accompanying a trial and a condemnation which has really been decided long in advance.<sup>2</sup> A public trial and execution creates a bond of brotherhood between the participants who share both in the crime and the spoils; it dilutes the sense of individual guilt by accentuating the profit for the community — the so-called social value of the act.<sup>3</sup>

The actual ceremonial meal — like the ideas associated with it — is by no means the unique property of stone-age man; examples are to be found right down through the ages in all societies, and without exception they are performed with the same hope — that the feasters will inevitably acquire the virtue that originally resided in the victim.

In Egypt the sacred meal of Serapis followed upon the killing of the sacred bull which was then cut into fourteen pieces — like Osiris whose sacred body had been cut into fourteen pieces by his wicked brother Set — and then eaten ceremonially by the faithful. The result of participation in this meal was believed to be prodigious, and even to give life eternal. At the end of the meal another bull was introduced to replace the one just offered, and Reinach

<sup>1</sup> Certain ceremonial regalia in modern Celebes include various portions of the bodies of deceased rajahs. Only lately in Italy during the exposure of the body of a saint who had died three centuries ago, one of the toes was bitten off by an enthusiastic worshipper. As a result the bodies of saints exhibited at the present time are given every possible protection.

<sup>2</sup> The so-called political purges of recent years are invariably carried out with great show and much patriotic pageantry. This parallels the propitiation ceremonies performed by rudimentary societies when sacrifice seems necessary to safeguard the state.

<sup>3</sup> This feeling of collective guilt and its effects on the customs connected with sacrifice is extensively described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, and also by Freud's followers.

adds significantly that Osiris was thereby resuscitated in the person of the bull — suggesting that the same possibility existed for the participants.

Ancient Greece also had its religious festivals in which the flesh of the sacred animal was eaten. In the omophagies — feasts in honour of Dionysos-Zagros — female celebrants gorged themselves on the raw flesh of a stag, a practice that persisted long after the Greeks had become accustomed to the eating of cooked meat only. The sacred element in this raw flesh was believed to strengthen the celebrants' relationship with Acteon, the stag-divinity.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the Maenads, the female votaries of Dionysos, dressed themselves in the skins of fawns when they sacrificed and ate the fawn Pentheus.

Even in more modern times we have impressive survivals of these ancient ritual meals. The Jews partook of a sacred repast, *Kiddush*, on the eve of Sabbath. At first sight a description of this simple ceremony does not remind us in the least of a sacrificial meal, for the food consisted solely of bread and wine, neither of which was taboo, neither especially 'strong' or dangerous. Nothing about this simple thanksgiving service would suggest another origin were it not for one part of the ceremony which directs attention to a deeper, occult meaning. This is the solemn blessing of both the bread and the wine by the head of the family, an act designed to impart special virtue to each of these simple foods. All present partook of the broken fragments of the single loaf and handed round the cup. Pliny says in a letter written to Trajan in A.D. 112 that this was still the Jewish custom in that year.

The real significance of this act of 'blessing' lies even deeper, but for the moment let us turn to the far more enlightening example of the ritual meal which occurs at the Passover.

The Passover is generally considered to be a fusion of at least two, and perhaps even more, ancient ceremonials. One of these, the feast of the unleavened bread, *Mazzot*, is certainly founded in an agricultural past, while the other, *Pesach*, is just as unmistakably connected with the customs of herdsmen. The feast resembles *Kiddush* in many respects, though here the food is lamb's flesh, strongly spiced. The killing of the lamb, the 'killing of the Passover', may very well be a holdover from the archaic Syrian feast celebrated each spring during which man called down the blessing of his gods upon his flocks. At this feast a lamb was sacrificed and it is probable that the victim, or certainly part of it, was consumed in a ceremonial meal at which the divinities were

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the animal consumed was a bull.

regarded as being present. Gradually this feast may have become fused with a more truly Hebraic festival, one dating from agricultural times and also celebrated at the beginning of spring, at which man implored his gods for a good harvest and offered up to them the first fruits of his field.<sup>1</sup> The resulting combination, which later came to be known as the festival of 'deliverance', serves us well as a record of evolving religious custom, and even more as a record of the evolution of religious thinking itself.

That the lamb may well have been eaten raw by the primitive worshippers seems indicated by the 'bitter herbs' ritually prescribed. These may have served to make the uncooked meat more palatable, or it has even been suggested that they disguised the nature of the flesh, for the lamb may have taken the place of a sacrificial victim of different kind — of human kind even. In this connection we may recall from Genesis that the lamb is the animal offered by Abraham in place of Isaac, the first-born son, who was himself to have been sacrificed. At any rate, some particulars of the actual Passover certainly hint at its originally having been a sacrificial feast.

One of these is the custom that the participants at the Passover meal should not eat and be merry until a boy, usually the son of the family, has entered the room and put the ritually prescribed question: 'In what manner does this day differ from other days?' This is then answered in an equally prescribed fashion by the oldest at the table who explains that the feast is in memory of the day God saved his people from the Egyptians. The tale of this deliverance is then told and in consequence the feast is also known as Seder or Haggadah, which means story.

The question and answer which precede the actual eating serve an essential purpose. First they furnish a plausible historical basis for a primitive tradition, and again they cover up a truth that is much better forgotten — that the original character of the Passover meal had been at least in part a self-sanctification, a god-eating, or an eating together with the deity.<sup>2</sup> Proof that the lamb of this meal was not an ordinary lamb, but was 'devoted', is the commandment given in Exodus 12, 10 that any part of the lamb which remains uneaten on the following morning must be burnt —

<sup>1</sup> Corn was sacred in remote agricultural times. Flour was probably part of the sacred meal in the Eleusinian mysteries.

<sup>2</sup> The Manual of Discipline of the Dead Sea Scrolls, almost certainly a relic of the Essenes dating probably from the second or first centuries B.C., describes a ritual meal very similar to the Passover meal. There it is expressly stated that the company may not touch the bread and the wine till the priest has blessed them.

good evidence that its remains were considered 'strong', dangerous, dangerous in the very actual sense that they could be put to magical use against the worshipper by his enemy. Probably this ceremony of self-sanctification was closely integrated with the traditional sacrifice of the first fruits of field and family to the deity<sup>1</sup> and this the prescribed interrogation also denies.

The much more modern thanksgiving service which accompanies the feast affirms various reasons for gratitude to God. While not explicitly stated, the greatest of these by far is man's exemption from the old and cruel obligations. No longer need he make the barbaric spring-time sacrifices, God no longer requires the sacrifice of the first-born child or the first fruits of the field; and even though man has given up the primitive tradition which required him to perform atrocious ceremonies to placate the gods of fertility and protect the house against evil, he need not be afraid; faithful obedience to the new rules, to God's moral commandments, is a valid substitute acceptable to God.

But the idea of thanksgiving goes even further. It is not enough that the Passover should be at once a memorial to the abolition of archaism and a thanksgiving for the replacement of barbaric values by spiritual values; the orthodox Jew must feel in his own person a consciousness of his deliverance 'from the Egyptians', for in this is symbolized the more specific thanks he owes to God for the many miraculous deliverances he has experienced in his own lifetime. With his thanks goes a renewed avowal of faith and the offer of his best efforts, so that in the end the ceremony is also a pledge, a confirmation of his union with the deity. At this point we can see how completely the old ideas have been spiritualized. A barbaric ritual has been transformed into a truly religious ceremony.

That the Eucharist — which literally translated means thanksgiving — has a similar ancestry is evident at once. There are parallels with Kiddush on the one hand and the Passover on the other: these include the use of bread and wine, the blessing of these foods and their consumption, and the use of the term 'hostia', meaning victim, in the service of the mass.

The archaic antecedents of this sacrament have been so repeatedly and over-abundantly discussed that it will not be further considered here. It may be noted, however, that even though partaking of the bread represents a fortification of man's higher nature by Christ's divine substance, many good Christians, and even clergymen like Emerson, have rejected the rite because they

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 13, 13: '... all the first-born of man among thy children shalt thou redeem.'



are unable to accept the archaic component still lingering in it.<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, are two examples of the ritual meal which have survived from antiquity to our own times, rituals which still hold supreme importance in two highly developed religious groups. To many who participate in their celebration the ceremonies no longer have other than symbolical meaning — a pledge and an act of faith; for others, and it is no small group, the ritual has all its old mystical power; by partaking of the sacred food they receive strength, protection, holiness, and by conforming to certain prescribed rules and maintaining the proper intentions they can be *sure* of retaining these benefits. In other words, these people carry about in our modern world those very habits of mind we have found to be characteristically pagan.

What we have seen thus far suggests that religion in its most primitive form is little more than a man's urge to appropriate for himself sacred elements and fortifying principles considered to be the property of superhuman powers; the belief that under proper circumstances and by certain mechanisms an automatic and unfailing transference of virtuous substance can be made from one body to another is still popular in the world although it no longer operates exclusively in what we think of as the religious field. If one has any doubt that eating, at least the eating of certain substances, is still a mystical act, let him note the steady consumption of certain foods and food-like substances which are eaten in the belief that they ward off sickness and prolong life. They are 'good for us', good being taken in the broad sense of that which makes us stronger.

The truth of these beliefs may be confirmed in part by experience, but it is none the less a fact that the beliefs themselves are based on ideas which obviously come down to us from the remote past. Why is it that for centuries *bouillon* has been considered the supreme strength-builder if not because it is derived from meat, in all probability sacred meat — the meat of the universally venerated symbol of power, the bull? How often rare or expensive foods are considered to be more 'healthful' than staple foods, not because the foods themselves contain any demonstrable extra-value, but because they are associated in our minds with the notion of sacrifice, here the sacrifice of money.

<sup>1</sup> The differences between the Eucharist and the Passover ceremony are of course evident to all, the one being a family affair with the father presiding, whereas the primitive Christian Communion was restricted to a little circle of men under the leadership of a priest. Material made available by the discovery in the first Qumran cave of two missing columns from 'the Manual of Discipline' increases the possibility that the Eucharist has antecedents even earlier than the Last Supper.

Thus we see again that acts commonly considered to be healthful — they may be religious acts and again they can be without any apparent connection with religion — enjoy this prestige because of the old idea that health is something one can accumulate, that ageing can be pushed back and youth preserved, that death comes as the result of losing something that might have been saved, and that man can absorb enough 'power' to protect himself against the eroding action of time and the elements.

Hygiene, it would seem, did not develop along empirical lines, but evolved in accordance with a kind of instinctive thinking. If, for example, recovery from illness is a return to a normal condition of health, it is natural to jump to the conclusion that applying the same cure to a healthy man can also be profitable, that such measures can make him healthier than healthy. If eggs are good for the sick, why shouldn't they be good for the well? If tender meat strengthens the one, why shouldn't it invigorate the other? If sacrifice achieves a cure, why shouldn't sacrifice turn out to be useful for the healthy man? This tendency to accumulate surplus strength, to hoard up health and power — and divine protection — is apparently one of the most vital urges in the human.

In fact, from the day of his birth, each human has one goal that takes precedence over all others — he wants to become so healthy, so whole and so 'good', that danger can no longer affect him. It is his fond hope that by possessing himself of some elusive virtue he may become as invulnerable as Achilles. Never quite given up is the hope that by knowing and observing the rules, by finding the secret formula which only waits to be discovered, he may solve the haunting problems of life and death and attain to the life everlasting.

As a result of this mechanism of thought, the original meaning attached to the word 'good' was a purely practical concept, and we should do well to remember this whenever we encounter the word in ancient texts. 'Good' originally meant that *which is good for us*, or rather what advances our good, the thing that *makes us good*. This old usage is to be seen in Genesis in connection with the taboo that attached to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Chapter 3, verse 5 reads:

'The day ye eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.'

and verse 6 extends this idea:

'... making ye wise ...'



The reasoning goes something like this — if man eats of the fruit, he will know what gives life and what takes life away. With that knowledge he would be able to renew himself indefinitely, becoming immortal 'like one of us'. Here 'good' is used in the purely practical sense of 'being that which confers health, life' and in all probability immortality.<sup>1</sup> The moral sense which we are accustomed to attach to the word only comes later, first perhaps in connection with the correct observance of just such taboos as this one, then afterwards in connection with the ripening of the individual's social consciousness, his acceptance of the obligations due from him as a member of the group and of the idea of a social value distinct from his own individual value, and finally in a still higher sense which will be discussed later. Actually moral implications are rarely attached to the word before the ages which came under the influence of Greek philosophy.

This elementary meaning of 'good' always relates to notions like useful, healthful, nourishing or strength-giving, and nothing but confusion arises when the modern usage is read into the word. This is true whether it is encountered in archaic literature or whether it is thrust upon the primitive mind of some savage tribesman. A South Seas missionary tells us how he caught one of his proselytes in the act of eating his wife. Reproving him with the words, 'This thing is not good,' he got the unexpected answer: 'But it's very good, try some yourself.'

The pagan will always regard 'goodness' as that which possesses 'virtue' or confers 'virtue', and this limited connotation was carried over into the Bible. It can be seen in the Hebrew word *Baracha*, regularly translated as 'blessed' and thus misunderstood. Quite probably it stands for forceful, vital, capable, fertile, having strength or having soul, all terms which were practically interchangeable in pre-psychological times. For example taking 'good' food was, as we have seen, a 'good' act and in some measure a sacred one. Doing good meant doing things that were good for oneself, that is, advantageous, things that increased one's powers, one's 'holiness'.

#### OTHER METHODS OF ACQUIRING 'THE GOOD'

We have found that most self-sanctifying procedures were involved

<sup>1</sup> Athena feeds Achilles on ambrosia at the request of Jupiter. The result is his extraordinary vigour.

The first of the four great sins attributed to Tantalus was his having stolen the *food of the gods* and given it to men. Another sin for which he was condemned to eternal torture was according to one version his having *told* the secrets of the gods.

in one way or another with eating. Even though this is true, other important methods have always existed to serve the same purpose. In passing we referred to the conviction among tribesmen that it was not only by eating the lion's flesh that one acquires the desirable attributes of that animal, but that by merely dressing in the lion's skin many of these virtues were imparted. Often direct infusion of the potent substance was considered unnecessary to effect the transference of the virtue of that substance. Although Achilles was merely dipped in the sacred Styx he was rendered invulnerable just the same. The same thing happened to Siegfried when he bathed in the dragon's blood. Many other legends could be cited where external application of the magical fluid, or the touch of a magical object, was enough to achieve the desired end, and one method in this category which enjoyed supreme prestige in almost all religions and has been favoured in all countries at all times is application to the body under rigidly prescribed conditions of sacred 'oil', the method known as *anointment*. Perhaps there is no procedure which casts more light on the nature of basic religious thought than this time-honoured ceremony.

In primitive societies the anointed person is not only considered sacred, but invulnerable, replete with virtue and capable of imparting his supernatural virtues to others. His touch alone will often suffice to work miracles. Even in more advanced societies it is widely believed that the anointed person can heal by simply laying his hands on the patient's head. In England the king's touch cured scrofula while in France the monarch could alleviate goitre and glandular scrofula on the day of his coronation — that is, on the day he had been anointed. As late as 1825 Charles X, the last Bourbon, successfully demonstrated this miracle after he had received the sacred oil. Hebrew priests and kings were considered sacred after being anointed; they were 'set apart', dedicated, and any offence against them was an offence against the deity. All the cult objects of the Temple were anointed, that is, devoted to the deity, and by virtue of that ritual they were proof against demons. The emperor Vespasian worked miracles in Alexandria healing the blind with a drop of his saliva<sup>1</sup> and it was not exceptional for those sick of the palsy to be made whole when the shadow of the anointed one fell upon them.<sup>2</sup>

The mechanism whereby these miraculous powers were acquired is far from apparent, however. That the eating of magical substances should have magical effects is understandable; substances swallowed or infused are generally accepted as being assimilated,

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae IV*, chapter 81.

<sup>2</sup> This miracle has been attributed to both apostles Peter and Paul.

their properties being added to the body, but that the mere application of mysterious oil to the skin should have miraculous effects would not seem altogether believable even to men totally devoid of scientific appreciation. The mystery will be solved, however, if we can discover what this mysterious oil was and what the act of anointing actually was believed to be.

Reliefs which once decorated the entrances of Assyrian palaces show a god consecrating the king, while another common subject show the king in the act of 'watering' the tree of life with a sacred fluid. In each case the gestures are similar. This tree of life is either the palm (in Assyria) or the fig (in Chaldea), both trees that are usually artificially fecundated, and we may presume that the king's gesture symbolizes this act of 'giving life'.

When we see the god in a similar gesture touch the king with his extended sceptre, the interpretation is forced upon us that this, too, is an act of fecundation. The conclusion seems even more inevitable when we realize that some similar act played a part in most of the rites which took place each spring throughout the ancient world.

These were invariably festivals of 'joy' (in Rome, they were called *Hilaria*), and they were regularly accompanied by ritual orgies during which the ejection of seminal fluid became an essential part of the procedure. The rebirth of nature was deemed to be the result of a fecundating act by the deity, and man by his own act encouraged, or provoked, the divine act. In Syria and Canaan throughout the first millenium B.C. the sexual act was part of the cult; the temples were endowed with staffs of prostitutes — male and female — who had to be propitiated if one was to obtain the sacred benefits of absolution and sanctification — in other words health, success and long life.<sup>1</sup> The Syrian god, Baal, was a god of fertility, and for the Syrian all aspects of increase, growth and profit and even security were comprised in the idea of fertility; in Baal was the male principle which effected reproduction in everything living, the flocks and fields as well as human kind; he was literally 'the husband of the land'.<sup>2</sup> The spring rains were believed to be the divine fluid which fertilized the land, but it was not only fields and orchards that could be awakened to new life

<sup>1</sup> These rites of Baal penetrated the Judaic world extensively so that ritual prostitution, along with child sacrifice and necromancy, the other 'abominations of Baal' were quite usual (Jeremiah 7). Hosea sighs: '... your daughters commit whoredom, and your brides commit adultery ...' and '... you sacrifice with harlots.'

<sup>2</sup> Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, p. 108. In Greek mythology, Danae, literally earth, is visited by Zeus in the form of a golden shower.

at this turn of the seasons. After the long months of winter men themselves yearned for rejuvenation, and the magic fluid sent down from heaven by Baal and his kindred divinities could, if the divinities were properly invoked, accomplish much for the individual also by giving him new vigour and new life. Therefore, one part of the spring rites, and in later times it was no minor part of these rites, was concerned with the absolution, the sanctification and the rebirth of man through contact — direct or symbolical — with the sacred fluid.

Baptism, which originally was performed in the spring also, and which is in its essence a sanctification by supernatural forces, may be in the line of descent from ceremonies such as those just described, ceremonies in which man sought to be born again, reborn to new life, to a better life and greater bliss. The parallel between baptism (or the spring ceremonies) and the process man observes in nature is particularly clear in one special aspect of these rites. Rebirth cannot take place unless it has been preceded by death. Just as in nature death withers the foliage of a plant, so in these rites death carries off the sinful side of man leaving the better element to be reborn into new life. In the baptismal ceremonies this idea of death as a necessity for rebirth is clearly present. Originally baptism was by total immersion, 'a burial in water', and it remained this for more than 1000 years. It symbolized an actual drowning and in the early baptismal ceremony the initiate was plunged into the water three times, a number which was meant to recall the three days Jesus lay dead in the tomb before his resurrection. It should also be remembered that baptism was performed only once each year, on the night of the Saturday before Easter — the eve of the day on which Jesus had risen from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many traces of archaic thinking lingered long in the baptismal ceremony. The expulsion of evil had to precede the reception into grace, and so an act of exorcism took place — breathing upon the child — which drove out the evil spirits. Since these spirits would have contaminated the sanctuary, the baptistery was always separately housed in the early church. The church proper was reserved for those already 'saved'.

The octagonal shape of the baptismal font has its origin in mystical arithmetic. 4 stood for the body, 3 for the soul, and 7 symbolized the whole man. Therefore number 8 coming after 7 was appropriate as a representation of man's liberation.

Anointing and baptism are intimately related in Christian thought. Jesus became manifestly Son of God by 'the anointing of the holy Ghost' (Acts 10, 38) 'at his Baptism' (see Luke 4, 18 a); in Mark 1, 11 'the spirit entered into him and the divine voice was heard saying, Thou art my beloved son'. Even today in the Catholic baptism the crown of the head is anointed with the chrism (sacred oil). It is important to note, also, that baptism as a rule cannot be repeated — which proves that its effect is real and not symbolic. It is up to man to preserve the divine spirit that has entered into him.

Although baptism is not to be identified with anointment, there are enough common characteristics in the archaic forms of these two ceremonies to draw them very closely together and to establish a connection between the fluids employed. Baptismal water is not river water brought from the Jordan as one might expect from the original rite. Baptismal water is ordinary water which has been blessed, but not by the sort of blessing any priest might give at any time. Baptismal water is blessed by a high dignitary of the church at a special ceremony held in close conjunction with Easter. This brings its association with an act of fecundation very close, and if this is not enough, another detail of this blessing proves the association in still another way: the priest proceeds to the baptismal font with three lighted candles which he then immerses in the water, a symbolism behind which the archaic meaning can hardly be mistaken.

Not only the details of the ceremony but many ideas associated with baptism have undeniably pagan antecedents, but the typical 'pagan' way of thinking comes out most clearly when we see how the recipient imagined this fortifying mystery should affect him.

In the rites of the Magna Mater the worshipper bathed in sacrificial blood and believed that by this 'baptism in blood' he was thereby 'born again into eternity'. The blood of the bull was taken to be his essential life-substance and to carry with it divine powers; as the *myste* stood in a pit with the blood streaming down upon him, he received what the cult called 'salvation', a protection which extended even into the life after death. It was also believed that the rite redeemed sin, and Tertullian tells us that the priest made a sign upon the forehead of the *myste* which was very much like the sign of the cross made on the child's forehead during the Christian ceremonial. Naturally parallels like these shocked the early church fathers who were unable to see or admit any relationship, and it was probably such parallels in rituals and terminology which caused Justin Martyr (put to death at Rome in A.D. 167) to protest with such bitterness 'that the devil has given our sacred rites to the service of idols'.

Justin had good reason to be indignant, but actually he was indignant about the wrong thing. It was not so much the details of the ceremony which mattered, but rather the way in which the ceremony was supposed to work its miraculous effect that made it a 'service of idols'. The dominant idea behind these barbaric ceremonies was that in pronouncing certain words and making certain signs the magic substance was *forced* to enter the body of the initiate, and that all the initiate himself had to do from thenceforward was to adhere faithfully to the prescribed forms of

worship. If no mistake was made by priest or *myste*, the divinity had no choice but to obey. The divinity was coerced, and no matter who or what the man himself might be, he became sanctified and 'saved'; the rules having been established by the deity himself, the initiate's act was binding on the god and the desired effect followed inevitably.

In this kind of thinking we sense, as we may have sensed already in other examples of primitive cult practices, what it is that may be defined as the pagan religious attitude. It is not the veneration of a palm tree or bathing oneself in bull's blood that makes man a pagan, nor is it feasting upon a human victim. Eating another human merely makes him a cannibal, and his attempt to seize upon the victim's virtues or powers makes him a robber. What is pagan about this man is the idea which is fixed in his mind while eating the victim, while sacrificing the bull, while submitting to his mysteries, that is, his sure conviction that by this act of eating or anointing or baptizing, he not only enhances his physical powers, but is adding to his virtue, that the mysterious element which formerly resided in the victim, or in the magic fluid, is now *inevitably* forced to enter into him, and that what he is doing will unfailingly produce the desired mystical result. Thus the pagan, ever seeking to increase his safety and his strength, makes his religious activity an integral part of his day-to-day struggle with his environment.

VIRTUE ATTAINED BY NOT-DOING RATHER THAN BY DOING  
Thus far we have considered two broad categories of sanctifying procedure, those concerned with eating and drinking, and those dealing with the application of oil or water to the body's surface. Described thus, and examined closely both are apt to appear as completely rude and primitive. Surely, one thinks, some ceremonies, some ritual gestures are spiritual in the extreme. Indeed some are, but others, too often taken to be typically Christian, actually demonstrate even more clearly the pagan attitude latent in 'religious man'. We mean such procedures which may be undertaken privately since they do not require the intervention of a priest. Lumped together these consist in abstaining from action rather than from positive action, and for this reason they may be in a sense called negative acts of sanctification.

In his avidity to better himself, man has expended his genius developing the most refined methods for wresting from his gods such favours as he has failed to acquire by other means. He has carried this process a considerable distance when he discovers that sanctification of a new order is to be had, not by the performance, but by the renunciation of acts which would normally be considered



'good'. This negative form of goodness is not the monopoly of higher civilizations, however, for it can frequently be seen operating in the least developed societies. In fact the negative holy act, in contrast with the positive, is one of the fundamental expressions of religious feeling.

We have seen that the appropriation of a 'good' thing was believed to make a man better, but presently it was recognized that refusal to use this opportunity also had its merits. Fasting, for instance, came to be regarded as conferring a higher order of virtue than the consumption of strength-giving food. To strike down the enemy is good, but to refrain from this appropriation of another man's power is better: to fight external danger is good, but to fight one's own drive for self-preservation is better still. Nor is this all. If controlling the instinct for self-preservation is good, renunciation of the still stronger drive, the strongest drive of all, the drive to reproduce one's kind, is better still — a truly 'holy' act. To beget sons is a great good, but to live chaste raises a man to spheres of even greater virtue. Abstinence is always a source of strength. The warrior abstains from sexual intercourse on the day before battle, and general abstinence is the rule among primitive tribes during periods of stress. Chiefs of primitive tribes go through rituals of voluntary abstinence in order to increase their magical virtue, and substitutes for this sort of physical renunciation are found in many coronation rites. The complete renunciation of sexual life — which implies the sacrifice of self in all future generations — is still the most potent of all 'good' acts. Priests in many societies are heard to say that they 'prefer strength to women', and it is no matter of chance that they dress themselves like sexless beings.

Physical self-denial is often said to be a way to 'knowledge', and the man who eschews the sexual life altogether is the 'wisest'; not only does he enjoy divine protection, power and virtue, but he becomes endowed with a supernatural intelligence which radiates from his body, living or dead. He is the holiest of holy men, the Magus, the great medicine man.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The relics of St Martin of Tours were famous for their extraordinary powers. Oracles were sought at his tomb. A Visigothic king seeking the cure of his sick child sent to the funeral chapel a bar of gold which weighed as much as the child himself; the saint would certainly interfere. Radiation from the saint's body also worked cures. One of Martin's biographers, Gregory of Tours, stated that oil taken from the lamps that lighted the sanctuary worked infallible cures; the use of this oil was recommended during times of epidemics, and dust from St Martin's grave mixed with water was also an efficacious medicine if taken internally. Gregory carried a small quantity of this sacred dust with him whenever he went abroad.

Now the idea that 'good' is obtained by abstinence is not easy to understand. In his need to rationalize man has explained it with the theory that abstinence constitutes an offering to the deity — an offering of pain or privation suffered. Yet believers have always had difficulty in comprehending the nature of the pleasure gods are said to derive from gifts so painful to their worshippers. It can be presumed, however, that an offering to the spirits is the projection of a familiar experience in everyday life — if I give something away, surely another gains by it. The idea that the gods profit by my loss is simply a way of explaining my own behaviour to myself.<sup>1</sup>

In any case this conviction that abstinence and privation is meritorious is so strong that it has left its mark on many important rituals of the so-called sacramental type. The initiation of a young man into full membership in clan or church, the dedication of a child to the deity, and similar events, can only be effective if a part of the body is offered to the deity. Intimately related to the concept already discussed that death must precede rebirth, the idea prevails that it is only through the sacrifice of some essential part of the body that one wins the good graces of the protecting divinity for any particular young person or child. The evolution of the ideas surrounding the Hebrew rite of circumcision is a good example of how the most advanced religious thinking can develop from purely pagan roots.

Genesis 17, 11 categorically requires circumcision without giving any other reason for the sacrifice than:

'... it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and thee.'

But the idea behind this sacrifice is clear when we remember that the rite was originally performed at puberty,<sup>2</sup> the age at which this by no means exclusively Hebrew rite is performed among many

<sup>1</sup> To speak always of gods or divinities when we try to understand the behaviour of primitive men can be misleading. Often the beings worshipped, feared and propitiated are inchoate in the extreme. From the average tribesman it is very difficult to obtain any information about the spirits he serves; often this reluctance is attributable to fear or unwillingness, but more often than not the man himself is unable to give words to his feelings.

By spirits is generally meant any 'object temporarily or permanently associated with the supernatural power to be obtained by a ritual act', which is a very reasonable definition. In this respect there is hardly a more enlightening observation than Landtman's that 'the conception of spiritual beings differs from one group, and even from one individual, to another' (quoted by Radin, *Primitive Religion*, 1937, p. 30). Belief in established divinities becomes general only after their existence has been officially proclaimed by the decree of a king or an arch-priest, or has been accepted as having been directly revealed by divine manifestation.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 17, 25: 'Ishmael was 13 years old when he was circumcised.'



other peoples. At the very moment the young man is first able to beget children he is required to give up symbolically — in a simulacrum of castration — this greatest of human functions. Thus he appeases the deity and acquires his protection.

Without active participation on the youth's part a portion of his body is sacrificed with the obvious intent, and in the certain belief, of putting him under Yahveh's direct protection, of making him Yahveh's own. Why the sacrifice should take this particular form remains to be explained. Actually the begetting of children, the giving of life by one's own act, has always been considered direct and flagrant competition with the divinity who should by rights have a monopoly on the creation of life. It is natural, therefore, that man should seek to appease his god in advance for the affront the son will one day commit, and what sacrifice could be more convincing and protect the body more certainly against the divine anger than offering the life-begetting organ itself? Some vague memory of this archaic usage lingers in the modern ceremony, but the main idea prevailing in the mind of the worshipper of our day is a sense of humility before the divine power and the surrender of one's pride in recognition of the divine eminence, all of which primarily concerns the parents rather than the child. Very much as in baptism the parents are solemnly 'dedicating' their child to the deity and by that act promising that they will do everything within their power to establish and keep alive the child's own wish to belong to the deity. This is a long advance over the primitive idea of give and take, and in it we see how the ideas characteristic of true religion gradually prevail over paganism.

Originally, however, and this must be kept in mind, the belief in the supreme 'good' to be obtained by an act of supreme renunciation was the guiding force in most religious thinking. The renunciation of sex, to repeat, a sacrifice so radical that it might be taken as equivalent to the renunciation of life on earth, was an offering so supreme that it assured one a great excess of the vital principle, that is, the prospect of *life eternal*. A long series of instances drawn from all countries and all times could be cited to illustrate this deep-seated, almost instinctive human belief; the Attis festival which was celebrated in the spring throughout the greater part of the ancient world is a rude but very typical example.

Attis was a youth who castrated himself, and by his tragic immolation attained the status of a demi-god and the enjoyment of immortality. Following this example Attis' worshippers were invited to imitate his sacrifice on the third day of the feast. The

priests, acting vicariously for their followers, seem actually to have performed Attis' act upon their own persons — some historians argue that their gestures were only symbolic — but of the laity nothing more was expected than that they abstain from eating and from intercourse. By this symbolical act, however, the worshippers were supposed to have dedicated their most virile and vital powers to the deity and thereby to have attained to a superior condition of life.

However, there is a great disadvantage in any ritual celebration which takes place but once a year and then has to be performed under the supervision of a priesthood. The human soul is too ambitious to limit its mystical growth to occasional festivals like these. Man seeks for ways which give him continuous sanctification.

One step in this direction was the burnt offering, said to be 'sweet savour' to the divinity (Leviticus 17, 6) and which could be performed repeatedly, but here again, once the fat had burned away and the fragrant smoke ceased to rise from the altar, the sanctification ceased. Lamps and candles came nearer to solving this problem. In many religions lamps are kept burning continuously. They are placed by worshippers near tombs or on altars, and used thus they not only prolong the act of sacrifice but also perform a second function. The candle or lamp does the ritual work that the absent devotee would otherwise have to do himself, much as the dolls put near the altar in many Asiatic temples are supposed to continue the prayer which the worshipper has broken off. Incidentally the more the doll resembles the donor, the more likely it is that the divinity will 'recognize' him, and the more effective the offering will be. It is highly probable that those semi-religious paintings executed by so many of the great renaissance masters, in which a saint is depicted with the donor, were offered to churches with this same thought in mind, not so much as a gift but as a permanent sacrifice and a permanent act of devotion, which would be profitable to the donor in the true archaic sense, and perhaps even the more so if the likeness of the donor was executed in a particularly life-like manner.

#### TECHNIQUES AND TACTICS THAT TAKE THE PLACE OF REPEATED OFFERINGS

Few worshippers have had means in hand to offer permanent sacrifices such as Italian princes were able to arrange for themselves, but one could wear upon one's person certain insignia,

certain symbols which kept the wearer in constant touch with his protective powers. Too generally it is accepted that early Christianity quickly swept away all these old pagan customs and made the world 'religious' in the best sense. Somewhat naively the great scholar Cobern remarks<sup>1</sup> that the Christian faith triumphed in the third and fourth century because it set its face against the adoration of demons and the use of pagan amulets. These latter gradually disappeared, he continues, and in their place appeared Bible texts, the name of Jesus, the cross itself, together with those earlier symbols, the grapes, the fish, the anchor and the trees, which were 'not against the new religion'. Though such a development may be considered a victory for Christianity as an official institution over its rival cults, there are many who would only call it a spiritual defeat, a defeat which has not yet been entirely redeemed.

In fact, it would be utterly unreasonable to expect that charms and amulets which had been in such great vogue throughout the ancient world would suddenly disappear on the day the Christian faith was introduced; it is naive to suppose that the replacement of a frankly pagan charm by one which differs only by its Christian guise makes the mummary any less pagan or more Christian.

In those early times the cross was regarded as a powerful amulet with little of the meaning which it has for Christians today. Rather than as a memorial, an avowal of faith, or the symbol of a way of thinking, it was a charm of practical use against the evil eye and demons, against storm and plague, and then with the centuries it became a defence against evil in general, evil emanating from others, evil words, evil intentions, and last but not least a guard against the evil that may invade the wearer's thoughts. It was worn around the neck and came to have the same power of exorcism as the name of Jesus and certain Bible texts. Significantly enough for those who would understand so-called Christian habits, the cross had already been used as a device to ward off hostile elements long before Christian times<sup>2</sup> and the difference between

<sup>1</sup> C. M. Cobern, *The new archaeological discoveries and their bearing on the New Testament*, 1929, p. 676.

<sup>2</sup> Veneration of the cross is closely related to its age-old ancestor, veneration of the tree. That trees are venerated throughout the world, and in many regions considered to be the residence of mighty spirits, is demonstrated by the practice in many countries of hanging offerings on trees. The worship of the oak is still universal in Asia Minor. Certain of the spirits which are believed to inhabit these oaks are called Benat Yakob — daughters of Jacob — a relic of old idolatry. Jehovah appeared to Abraham at the oracular oak of Shechem, and at Mamre oracles were given by interpreting the rustling of the leaves. In Acts 10, 39 we are told that Jesus was 'hanged on a tree'.

The tree has been venerated as man's ancestor since the earliest times. To

this use of the cross and magic in general is difficult to trace.

It is a shocking thing to find that the cross on which Jesus was put to death has been used in so many ways, and in accordance with a type of thinking, which we utterly reject. Even more disconcerting is the discovery that certain virtues — especially the so-called evangelic virtues — were put to use in much the same fashion. In the first millennium of our era it was accepted that one who possessed those virtues, or even professed them, acquired a state of grace no matter who he was, no matter what he had done. Clovis, the first Frankish king to embrace the Roman faith, and a man notorious for his scandalous behaviour, none the less bears the epithet 'The Blessed'.

Inevitably symbols and acts will be accepted as 'good', and as productive of virtue, once it becomes generally believed that they have been prescribed by the divinity; but even where no divine sanction is claimed, where the only authority is human authority, conformance is generally considered good and to add mystically to the worth of the individual. This is true to such a degree that most acts which men perform in obedience to authority tend to become 'ritual' in the sense that they are believed to be divinely prescribed. Form and gesture are soon substituted for content; the purpose of the procedure, whether religious or merely mechanical, is forgotten and the acts themselves soon have for the individual all the archaic value of magical incantation.

The best illustration of this is to be found in children. Recall how readily they imitate the gestures they observe in adults without pretending to understand their purport, how they attach values to these gestures, values in which they put the same complete trust which a primitive tribesman has in the rhythmic movements prescribed for him by his medicine man. This way of acting is what Levy Bruhl called prelogical — the failure to take account of inconsistencies, the lack of a clear concept of causal relationship, the acceptance of accidental resemblance as determining. Certain acts are 'good', efficient, and no tribesman asks why. Likewise the child knows with certainty that certain acts have to be performed 'that way', and no child asks why. The 'it has to' is enough; that way is 'good'. One climbs on a bicycle this way and every other way is 'wrong', even if it happens to work. In general their idea of what is 'good' is intimately related to the pattern set by their elders. Children will sing in church, chiming

ward off the wrath of the Manes the man who sinned against them had to be offered to those Manes. Like the obelisk the cross was venerated in Egypt as a divine symbol, probably meaning 'the man on the cross', long before Jesus was born.

in with the others and feeling 'better' because of this 'good act', even though the meaning of the song is entirely lost on them. On a feast day they accept the fact that they must dress in certain ways and do certain definite acts. No child asks why or expects an explanation. What is more, none *wants* an explanation. An explanation would destroy a part of the holiness of the act; an explanation would bring it down from the mysterious regions of the supernatural to the prosaic spheres of practical life. No more does many a fervent believer wish to be exposed to an explanation of the rites he performs. He performs a holy act, an act which fills him with awe and gives him the feeling that he has invoked and received divine aid and protection. If his devotions stop there, it is difficult to see how it raises him above the level of the pagan who offers a goat, dances around the fire and feels 'better' in consequence.

Even the Bible, as a book, has from time to time been put to uses we may now recognize as typically pagan. Too often the sacred volume functions as a talisman, an instrument for certain healing practices. The book is given to the sick man to hold, laid upon the sick part of his body, or even placed under his pillow. As for reading the Bible, that can become a rite in itself, the reading of the sacred text being taken as productive of special virtue without regard to the understanding of what is being read. As a matter of fact an honest effort to understand the text has rarely been thought necessary to make the reading meritorious and this is even more the case when it comes to understanding the Creed. That a Creed may offer difficulties to the intelligence is never an obstacle to its acceptance. On the contrary, the impossibility of understanding either the ritual act or the exact meaning of the belief adds to the holiness of both; the deadening of the wish to understand is felt to be a wholesome sacrifice, an act of self-humiliation, a renunciation for the greater glory of the divine, and thereby 'good'.

There is no better way to understand this retrogression into archaism than to examine the act considered to be the holiest and the most strictly religious of all, prayer. Prayer, for most individuals the most sincere and intimate expression of the bond they feel between themselves and the Almighty, is more often than not transformed into a ritualistic exercise, a technique for obtaining from heaven 'what has been promised'. Primitive tribes seldom regard prayer as conversation between man and deity. Prayers must be said in certain words, at certain moments and in certain attitudes. Even among the henotheistic Jews who regarded Yahveh as their own, prayer was a rite, and effective only if performed in

ritual fashion, and so it remains today for a great number of those people who actually pray. Details which seem unrelated to the words become of prime importance, the place, the time of the day, the corporal attitude. The orthodox Jew may not pray, nor even read the Hebrew Scriptures, without covering his head, and if it comes to certain recitations he also equips himself with the *talit*, the Prayer Shawl, and the *tefilin*, phylacteries containing the Mosaic laws. Since it has been written that he should keep these laws on his heart, in his mind and write them on his house, these laws have for many an exorcistic significance, protecting the heart, the mind and the doorposts against the intrusion of evil, and insuring the loving presence and the open ear of the Almighty during prayer. It is the same in all religions. Five times a day at the muezzin's call the right-feeling Moslem spreads his prayer rug, turns his face to Mecca and bows rhythmically as he repeats the prescribed prayers from the Koran. The Christian uncovers himself, kneels and with bowed head and folded hands recites what is as likely as not a set prayer. These attitudes, which should symbolize respect for the deity and a turning aside from earthly preoccupations, are rather generally felt to enhance the effectiveness of prayer; they represent obedience to authoritative prescription and tradition, and this added to the discomfort they involve, make them small acts of self-sacrifice which necessarily call for divine recognition.

Also supremely effective in this direction is the foreign language so universally used to enhance the power of magic formulae. The pronouncement of some sort of abracadabra was an indispensable part of any secret ceremony. To be 'powerful' a phrase should be incomprehensible. It is not a matter of chance that in Chaldea most of the religious literature continued to be written in Sumerian for centuries after that tongue had been replaced as the spoken language by the completely unrelated Semitic. The old Sumerian continued to be used as a kind of sacred language just as Latin and classical Hebrew continue to be used in churches today.<sup>1</sup>

And yet the Gospels were written in the speech of the street, in the so-called *koine* Greek which differs materially from classic literary Greek, and this fact is very good evidence of the original anti-ritualistic tendencies in the New Testament. Unfortunately translation and linguistic changes developing with the centuries have gradually removed this barrier that the Gospels put up against the misuse of the text.

Luther, who was aware of the tendencies to archaism in the average worshipper, abolished the use of Greek and Latin in the

<sup>1</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Times of History*, p. 166.



service and in prayers, but within a few generations his congregations had created a new and special language for pious occasions, a stilted form of archaic German which the modern ear instantly associates with church-going. The often cryptic and in certain cases absolutely meaningless translations we find in German and English Bibles do not repel the normal reader. Any attempt to put the scriptures into modern language is received with almost universal indignation because the congregations feel a very real sense of loss when the stimulus to piety afforded by the revered language is withdrawn.<sup>1</sup>

To every primitive, and to altogether too many civilized individuals the effectiveness of prayer depends on the observance of these and other restrictions. Originally the Pater Noster had to be recited three times a day, a rule which survives in the custom of saying prayers at bedtime. Far from being a prayer in which the individual could address himself freely to God, it was considered as a preliminary to communion, a sort of act of purification. It seems to have been made an integral part of the very earliest liturgy, and in the majority of Christian services, ancient and modern, it is repeated at one certain prescribed moment which is absolutely fixed. For many it is still not so much an expression of man's proper attitude towards God as taught by Jesus, but something more like an exorcistic formula, a precise succession of words laid down by the highest authority which cannot fail to have beneficial effects.<sup>2</sup>

There are parts of the world in which the words of prayers mean little or nothing. The Tibetan Lama endlessly repeats his *Om Mane Padme Hum*, 'Hail, jewel of the Lotus', the invocation of God's presence being for him the one act that counts, just as it must be in certain Protestant churches where one may hear the

<sup>1</sup> The language in which the Bible has been read in childhood becomes sacred for most worshippers. Goropius, a Dutch writer, tried to prove in 1580 that Dutch was the language spoken in Paradise; another writer maintained that the language spoken by Adam was Basque, and a Swedish scholar argued that the Almighty addressed Adam in Swedish while the serpent conversed with Eve in French (Frazer, *Folklore*, p. 147).

<sup>2</sup> The last lines of the Protestant version of the prayer appear to be an intrusion. They cannot be found in the oldest gospel manuscripts and they are omitted in the Catholic Pater Noster. For a correct understanding of these lines see p. 62.

At one time the arcane nature of the prayer was so generally accepted that the words were kept secret. Because of its high magical power it was thought necessary to protect it against misuse just as the name of God was kept secret by the Jews for the same reason. Without the help of the Greek text we would still be ignorant of the way in which the Tetragrammaton YHWH was pronounced.

words 'Oh Lord, Lord' repeated in a continuous rocking rhythm.<sup>1</sup> It is superfluous to add that for primitive-minded people prayer is simply a 'wholesome thing', one of the most rudimentary in the long list of sanctifying acts we have discussed.

#### SUPERSTITION AS A COMPONENT OF CULT

Mortal danger, however, may be the lot of those who would appropriate 'virtue' improperly, and it is impossible to understand the secret workings of the religious mind unless we take into account those latent fears and inquietudes which perpetually plague the virtuous man. These fears, in fact, are one of the major elements in what we commonly call 'superstition'.

We have already mentioned in passing that those who seek any powerful sanctification should do so in company. Sorcery, on the other hand, is always a private affair. As a result many religions specify that a minimum number of celebrants must be present before any service can be valid — among the Jews this minimum number is ten. However, the celebrating of rites in company does not itself guarantee protection from the wrath of an offended deity.

We have seen that all the sanctifying rituals described thus far were based on the theory that divinity could be coerced. The sacred substance, physical or spiritual — sacred flesh, sacred oil, *mana*, *orenda* or quite simple 'virtue' — was forced by the use of an irresistible act of magic to leave its dwelling place and enter into the person of the celebrant. The divine element was compelled to do what was asked of it, and the worshipper's attitude towards the divinity is actually one of aggression more than of supplication. What is more logical, then, than the fear that the spirits, or the divinity, might retaliate? Inevitably every 'good', healthful and beneficial act has its dark and evil side,<sup>2</sup> since the divinity is

<sup>1</sup> Prayers of this sort, like the dances of the Dervish, leave the worshipper in a trance-like state during which he feels himself to be in a closer relationship with God. Ecstasy in general is often taken to be a sacred condition, and in many parts of the world epileptics are considered saints.

<sup>2</sup> Many primitive tribes use the same word to connote both good and evil, for example, the word 'turen' of the Ainu which signifies both 'to be inspired by the gods' and 'to be possessed with a devil'. Even the New Testament gives us the example of people who are uncertain whether joy or fear is the appropriate reaction to the miracles they have witnessed. They wonder whether God or the devil is to be made responsible.

Mark 3, 21 tells us that Jesus' friends 'went out to lay hold on him' for they considered him 'in furorem versus est' — beside himself — and in 3, 22 the scribes said that he casts out devils 'by the prince of the devils'. Jesus' answer in Matthew 12, 26 and 27 is to the effect that good sorcery does not exist, and that good comes only and always from God.



considered to be the actual possessor of all good, and any worldly benefit obtained has, in some degree at least, been snatched away from him. Consequently every beneficial act, every meal, every smile of fortune, every happy moment carries with it its burden of guilt; each is a sinful betrayal of the divine powers who claim our perpetual adoration for having given us life and independence. This ambivalent attitude of the individual towards the powers that shape his life, an attitude of love and respect at one moment and of awe and fear the next, colours his whole religious life and accounts for the scores of restraints, cares and petty precautions which fill up his daily existence. Every one of his acts infringes in some degree on the sphere of the spirits; whatever our man does, be it even the simplest attention to his immediate needs, he fears that he is offending some unknown element, perhaps the divinity himself, and his conscience is continually implicated. For this reason the most striking characteristic of the pagan's attitude towards life is the fear that haunts him perpetually. Since every act in his daily routine includes within it some element of self-interest, since in serving himself he forgets the gods to whom he owes his service, he feels hemmed in by influences which must be appeased, by jealousies which must be reconciled, by dangers that must be warded off.

To offer apology for whatever one does, to seek to atone for one's acts even before those acts are accomplished, and to give a secondary and sanctimonious colour to intentions which are entirely selfish, is by no means the monopoly of the man we call pagan. Before any undertaking, before any significant act, too many persons must make sure that they are doing 'the right thing'. In an earlier time the oracle was consulted, the auspices taken, these being gestures of respect and obedience to the invisible world, but the parallels to or substitutes for these exercises are still very much with us in the world of today. In fact much of religious life is devoted to ceremonials and invocations designed to calm the worshipper's fear and to put the sacred teachings to use as a magical shield against an angry deity.

But is ritual, then, only a device for warding off danger — real or imaginary — for protecting the individual, soothing his anxieties, relieving his feelings of guilt, and permitting him to atone for his secret transgressions? Even more — is ritual simply a convenient remedy the twentieth-century pagan uses as a means of escape not only from well-founded fears but more specifically from the neurotic conditions under which modern society labours?

This last has been a much mooted question during the fifty years which have elapsed since depth-psychology, so called, first

established itself in the public consciousness. Ever since Freud drew attention to the similarity of the acts of certain neurotics and the ritualistic acts of primitive man, an increasing emphasis has been placed on the part ritual plays in modern society. Many of the stereotyped acts, prohibitions and ceremonials of the savage have an almost uncanny resemblance to the compulsive behaviour of the neurotic. Take the neurotic's obsessive washings for example. Isn't this an exact counterpart of the ritual washings of the faithful? The compulsive need to touch a door which many patients cannot suppress, what essential difference between this and the ritual act of the pious Jew who compulsively touches all doors which display the Commandments? Once psychoanalysis established this relationship between certain emotions and certain compulsion-neurotic attitudes, it was easy to go the whole way and say that these emotions and attitudes lay behind all cultic acts, that neurotic fear and nothing else was the thing that caused man to kneel and pray. As a result current psychological theory has an ever-growing tendency to consider most of the world's religious attitudes as the result of its abnormality.

Actually it is not hard to make out the fundamental difference between neurotic behaviour and cultic ritual. Lady Macbeth's hand washing will do as a working example. Her reason for washing is evident — the legitimate outgrowth of her sense of guilt, a guilt which she refuses to recognize as long as she is in a waking state. On the conscious level she feels no need to justify her act. In driving her husband to kill the king she has only enforced Macbeth's rightful claims, but during her periods of somnambulism it is another story. Then her intellectual arguments lose their power, and tortured by the imagined blood on her hands she futilely tries to wash it away.

Lady Macbeth is typical of the compulsive neurotic. Like her, our neurotic spends his days endlessly washing to rid himself of guilt, and the futility of the washing is obvious in either case. This method of cleansing themselves — and this is just as true if instead of washing they turn to acts of self-punishment or of excessive virtue — is ineffective for the simple reason that though they may obtain momentary relief, the depth of the soul is unaffected. The unresolved conflict in the subconscious is still at work. It thrusts its way to the surface at every hour of the day poisoning its victim's life despite all the ritualistic precautions he may take.

The difference between the ritualism of Lady Macbeth and the ritualism of the average believer should be apparent, however. True, Lady Macbeth's washings have the same compulsive quality we find in those of the Moslem, say, who washes ritually many

times a day. Some of the motives may even be similar. Her washing is an attempt to cleanse herself; his object as he washes his feet at the entrance of the mosque is in part the same: he dare not risk defiling the sacred precincts where he is in contact with God. But look more closely. This negative objective is not the *main* purpose of his ritual. He sees his strict observance of the injunctions of the Koran as a virtuous act; it is part of his general effort to grow in purity, in power and sanctity. For the greater part his religious act is *positive* in nature.

'I have fasted' says the orthodox Jew before he visits the graves of his family. In doing this, and in mortifying himself in many other ways, he undertakes to cleanse himself of unholy thoughts and unholy wishes, to meet the dead with a clean heart and clean mind, but as he performs these rituals, whose omission would be a sin that would draw God's displeasure, he is also hoping to grow 'better', to grow in moral stature. He is relieved and satisfied when he returns from his errand, relieved from his obsessive sense of duty, satisfied with his own rectitude. To overlook this second end accomplished by the performance of the ritual act is to overlook the age-old drive which fixes the greater part of humanity in its religious attitudes.

Psychopathology for reasons stated must be considered, then, as a side issue in our main argument. Ritualism is not the exclusive property of neurotics or semi-neurotics. As has been demonstrated, religious practice is the universal, primordial, inevitable and characteristic reaction of man to his precarious position in the world, and any attempt to classify it or its substitutes as a reaction to some special mental state, the infantile or the sexual for instance, is doomed to fail. Religion is mankind's oldest and most primitive way of dealing with 'evil' and seeking 'the good', and nothing that we have learned from psychopathology takes away anything from this fact. Religion begins in primitive man's attempt to challenge the overwhelming forces outside himself and for the great mass it is still just that.

The sceptic would say that religion is still just that for everybody. For him nothing in religion goes beyond the ritualistic paganism and semi-paganism of man trying to assert himself against the gods. Yet we know that a distinction can and must be made. Even if it is true that paganism is as common today as it has been in the past, we can be sure that a more truly religious feeling always exists in certain individuals, today, in pre-Christian centuries, even in the most benighted times. In remote antiquity, among savage African tribes, efforts have always been made by a

religious elite to rise above the primitive mechanisms of the masses. Among the Egyptians we hear of more than one reaction against paganism, more than one reform of high religious character. In the Osiris cult the worshipper endeavoured to create a relationship between himself and his god that transcended magic and mystery, a relationship that would be something more than that of the subject who tries to extort the maximum of personal benefit from his all-powerful and reluctant monarch.

We have texts which tell us that the worshipper of Osiris tried to *understand* his god, to learn his intentions and wishes, to create a warmer feeling within himself towards the ineffable being who retained all powers; we hear that he cultivated attitudes of high spiritual nature. But then, as always happens in such cases, the masses tried to take over these attitudes in which they sense great hidden virtue, great powers of healing and protection. Quite incapable of understanding their true meaning, they translated them into the recitations and gestures which made up the elaborate ceremonialism of the later Osiris worship. Step by step we can follow the process by which paganism laid hold on all that was best in these noble expressions of faith, and soon the adept is again praying to Osiris in minutely prescribed words and gestures and doing his best to observe the new priestly regulation which ordered him to *love* Osiris. Love had become compulsory. Love had become part of the ritual.

In the evolution of the Osiris cult, as in the evolution of so many other religions, we can trace the process by which the original paganistic ritual was slowly reinterpreted and overhauled until it took on a spiritual character. This development takes place when the religious elite begins to grow sceptical of the worth of their primitive practices and undertakes reforms. Osiris could not be invoked simply by making a burnt offering; one had to do a little more, and had to remember he was Osiris' child and act accordingly. Thus moral concepts are introduced that permit a new and higher interpretation of the old rituals and at the same time endow Osiris with new refinement and spirituality. But then a phenomenon which unfailingly recurs manifests itself; the innovations, now accepted and glorified by the best opinion, are themselves assimilated to the cult. High virtue is soon attached to these newly consecrated principles, and what began as a reaching out towards the best in religion becomes in its turn a technique. At that point the world is ready again for the voice crying in the wilderness.

Every man is a pagan to the extent that he will not rest content until his fundamental yearnings for happiness and security are satisfied,

and he will go to all lengths, and use any means, logical or illogical, to see that they are satisfied. He feels that without this peace of soul he can hardly be a useful member of society or go quietly about his daily business. Even with the enlightenment of the Christian ideal to aid him, those needs still cry for satisfaction and it would be unrealistic to expect them to be entirely and finally satisfied solely by his acceptance of this ideal. Though manners have changed and morals have been touched up, it is evident that the old methods with which man sought to meet these needs have never been finally eliminated.

It is not our purpose to describe the endless ways in which Christian doctrine assimilated paganism or to identify all of the various pagan practices which have crept back into Christian life, but we have tried to make it clear beyond all doubt as to the sense in which the words 'pagan' and 'paganism' are to be understood when used here to describe the ways and the thoughts of 'religious man'. Unless these meanings are appreciated one will have little real understanding of the forces which have influenced the redaction and interpretation of certain Bible passages, the original spirit of these passages will be obscured, and one will even lose sight of the significance of genuine religion itself.

Religion is always a thing to be won. For more than a thousand years before the Christian era, a battle had been raging in Palestine between paganism and higher religious forms. The first major attempt to cleanse religion of a ceremonialism in which the idea of God, if not completely suppressed, was at least vague and remote, had been made there by Moses. Mosaism is the first decisive effort, for which we have precise written evidence, to reform a cult, to strip it of its pagan ways of worship and to root out its background of magical thinking.

To consider Jesus' words without first considering Mosaism, and what happened to Mosaism, is to forget a truth which Renan aptly formulated by saying that Christianity had its beginnings in the eighth century B.C. What happened in the Jerusalem of King Josiah, what happened when Amos and Hosea and Isaiah were delivering their prophecies and flaying the abuse of religion and religious methods, is very much like what was happening in the Jerusalem of Herod when Pharisee clashed with Sadducee and another prophet came up out of Galilee.

Mosaism and its history helps us to understand Jesus.

## PART II



## CHAPTER 2

# The Struggle between Cult and Religion

### A. The Hebrew Solution

#### MOSES VERSUS CULT

MOSAISM is the name used to identify the early Hebrew religion, traditionally that of the Israelites of the Exodus, those semi-nomadic tribes which came up from Egypt and invaded Palestine from across the Jordan. On this new soil Mosaism came into collision with the crude cults of the Canaanites. From them it absorbed some elements, but for the most part it reacted so fiercely that a struggle began on the soil of the new homeland which would continue relentlessly for more than a millennium and never be finally decided.

The immense significance of Mosaism in the history of mankind is often overlooked by those who fail to distinguish it from the Judaism which gradually supplanted it. Critical minds are apt to wonder in what way monotheism, which is its outstanding characteristic, raises it so far above the pagan cults of contemporary peoples. They will argue that the Hebrew's morals were rude. They will recall the *herem*, the slaughter of any enemy who dared oppose them; they will recall, too, the death penalty visited on any of their own who might veer from the true faith. Yet proof exists to show that the moral code of these first Hebrews was not only severe but ethical, that their way of life was pure, their thought simple, and that this was the consequence of their monotheism.

To appreciate what monotheism means we must remember what we have been at pains to show in the preceding chapter, that the emotion which drives the pagan to his shrines is usually fear — the fear of death, of misfortune, of failure; he seeks safety and again safety, after which as a sort of bonus he will expect success in the enterprise at hand. The follower of Moses approached life in a very different way. He placed duty at the centre of existence, a duty, not to man, not to king or chief, not even to the clan, but a duty owed to God and to God only. For his every deed he believed himself accountable to this most holy, most wise, and mightiest of beings, the living God, unchanging, everpresent. His



consciousness of this eternal father brought quiet to the heart; God would care for man if man were wise enough to remember him, pure enough to serve him and holy enough to obey his laws. Yahveh, as the one Ruler, the wise and just, created integrity, dignity and courage. In contrast to the pagan who knew only venal priests and cruel chiefs, the Hebrew looked only to one supreme Judge, a concept of life which made heroes, and better yet, men. To perform one's duty makes life worth while; to be subject to a higher duty makes life glorious and death easy.

It was this sense of duty and faith that bound the Jew of Mosaic times to his God. In the Old Testament we find hardly a word with regard to an after-life, and the reader may well wonder why this prime religious requirement should be so consistently lacking in all these hundreds of pages of text. Was the fear of death set aside among these ancient men? Were they so different from the men of today? Had they no need of comfort, of a promise, an assurance from their teachers as they went on their way to the great Unknown? The answer has never been given and cannot be given except on the supposition that for these men God was all, everything, the only thing, that God's decisions were the only ones that counted and that God would take care of his people. Life belonged to God and must be lived for God alone.<sup>1</sup>

#### LAW IN PLACE OF MAGIC

How could Moses have built a morality of this magnitude in an age and a region so entirely devoted to pagan ritualism? First of all he had to stamp out what in his eyes must have been the superlative expression of sin, that is to say the human heart's attachment to cult, and in consequence of this we find the most striking feature of Mosaism in its apodictic character, especially this emphasis on restrictions and prohibitions. The stern 'Thou shalt not' may be taken as the categorical rejection of paganism in general and more particularly of the hideous cult practices then current in Canaan and Syria. When it was written 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live, or lie with a beast, or sacrifice children', it was because sodomy, necromancy, and orgiastic fertility ceremonies were the rule in the conquered land. No Jew would be suffered to bow before these bloodthirsty Baals.

Mosaism includes no 'mysteries'. With the possible exception of

<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees of later years supplemented the written Torah with new 'clarifications'. They taught the belief in a life hereafter, the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead. But this development came only in Macca-bean times.

Passover — from which the 'mystery' had already disappeared — it followed none of the procedures which sanctify the worshipper by robbing the deity of his power.

This was something totally new in religion, and it accounts for Mosaism's strength and glory. Instead of mysteries we find rules of conduct, rules of an extraordinary categorical character for which no parallel can be found in any contemporary religion. Sternly moral and ethical, showing a keen awareness of the pagan tendencies in humanity, these rules regulated every aspect of life — the treatment of the family, slaves, foreigners and even cattle. Diet, feast days, and almost everything pertaining to social intercourse was minutely provided for.

The absence of any explanation by Moses for the obligation placed on his flock to obey these rigid rules is baffling, but it is an inevitable consequence of the nature of his monotheism. Yahveh gives no reason for his laws; the Law is as it is because 'Yahveh so wills it'. His people are a holy people and the pagan customs are an 'abomination'. Such is his decree, and this insistence on absolute and unquestioning observance was to become a decisive factor in Mosaism's eventual development, and as will presently appear one of its weaknesses.

#### YAHVEH AND MONOTHEISM

To understand the particular character of Mosaic monotheism one must take into account the surviving elements of the original patriarchal religion. Mosaism is an innovation and a turning point, but not absolute in either instance. Monotheism was not unknown in other lands, Egypt being one example. There the spiritual, cosmic, and more or less international dominion of one supreme deity had been proclaimed by Ikhnaton, often called the first Monotheist, but strictly speaking the famous Pharaoh did little more than give a gentle, poetic interpretation to paganism. He never broke cleanly with it. The forbidding god of Moses, standing beside the tables of the Law and looking into the hearts of the faithful, the God who rejects all who seek religious benefits on a mercenary basis, who prohibits magic and who casts aside that Egyptian preoccupation with a life hereafter, this God who asks obedience, decency and unselfishness, a man's whole effort and all his faith, is a very different being from Ikhnaton's sun god. Moses' monotheism, then, had little to do with Egypt. The idea of one god, ill defined and undeveloped though it might be, was a principle that came straight out of Hebrew pre-history.

This link with the nomadic past is best evident in the Mosaic

conception of God's relationship to his flock. Abraham's god had been a tribal god, that is, a god who interested himself in one tribe only and was never tempted to overleap its borders and go venturing in the sphere of other peoples.

'I am the Lord thy God and thou shalt have no other gods before me.'

(Exodus 20, 2, 3)

This may be taken as an indirect avowal that other gods do exist. This is even clearly admitted in Deuteronomy 6, 14:

'Thou shalt not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you.'

Certainly Abraham's god was far removed from the universal, supranational, unique Yahveh of later times.

Even in Moses' conception of his supreme Being there is a hold-over of the archaic idea of kinship between the worshipper and his god. In patriarchal times God was accepted as the real chief of the clan, the *abhir*, the champion, to use Jacob's terminology. God, likewise, was man's ancestor, and there was a sincere belief in the undefined but very real blood relationship which existed between the clan and its god. For this Moses substituted a different, if not too different, concept of the bond between the Jews and Yahveh. Instead of a blood tie, Yahveh and Israel were bound by a covenant, an idea which came naturally to a people who had long believed that contracts were frequently executed between the tribe's most prominent men and the tribal god.

As for the ethical character so pronounced in Mosaism, it, too, is definitely foreshadowed in the primitive laws which regulated the older patriarchal cult. There can be no doubt that the original commandments found in Exodus 34, 17-26 antedate Moses' famous ten (Exodus 20, 1-17),<sup>1</sup> that they relate to a set of taboos instituted to protect the clan against the transgression of an individual in the group.

Take as an example of these patriarchal laws (Exodus 34, 25):

'Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven, neither shall the sacrifice of the feast of the Passover be left unto the morning.'

Today it is difficult to understand what necessity could have existed for laws of this nature, but at the time they obviously

<sup>1</sup> The fact that these appear first in the text is due to a revision probably undertaken in the fifth century at which time the sacred texts then extant were put into a form approximating their present state.

seemed imperative to safeguard the welfare of the tribe. We have already discussed the risk which was believed to arise when any part of a 'blessed' sacrifice was permitted to remain uneaten or unburnt; we are at a loss to explain the danger of mixing blood and leaven, but we can guess that a similar prohibition — against 'seething a kid in its mother's milk' (Exodus 34, 27), the last commandment in the primitive ten — harks back to pastoral times when the cooking of the milk was believed to be harmful to the goat that had given the milk, a belief still widespread among pastoral tribes. If the goat died as a result of such a transgression, the clan was damaged in its livelihood, and could justly regard the act as the equivalent of murder. One will not be far wrong in presuming that this last commandment presently evolved to the famous 'Thou shalt not kill'.

Although we cannot supply all the links connecting one group of commandments with the other, it is obvious that the humane element manifested in the later and better known decalogue of Exodus 20, 1-17, is the result of a slow, centuries-long development which transformed a very primitive concept of morality into the highest expression of fellowship, charity and duty.

No prophet is ever more than a reformer. Not even Moses achieves more than the reform of a religious system, and the reason for this general rule is obvious. Any complete prohibition of existing tradition only makes it doubly certain that in times of danger the population will turn back to its old ways. Take the farmer's wife who finds her child sick with a serious disease. Should the country doctor confess that there is nothing more he can do, one may be sure that she will resort to any measure reputed to be effective, not only seeking out the famous specialist in the city, but also taking her child to the shrine where cures are said to be worked. If she were asked to offer her goat in some midnight hokus-pokus she would not hesitate to do so, despite Moses or the Church.

Josiah, the reforming king of Judea, destroyed the groves and high places in the Palestine of his time, but he was not successful in eradicating the cult he attacked. No ruthless eradication of shrines and customs has ever been successful, and the Christian Church took its lesson from this experience. In Rome close by the place where St Peter is buried an Attis altar has been found. Melun's church replaces a temple of Isis, and even the famous Chartres Cathedral, a monument to Christianity, occupies the site of the ancient shrine of a black female divinity who once attracted yearly pilgrimages. The black madonna shown in the crypt today works the same cures for which her predecessor was famous.

Charlemagne made it his policy to erect a church on every site associated with pagan worship, and in the new world the great Cathedral of Mexico City now rises where the ill-famed temple pyramid of the Aztecs once stood.

In every age it has proved futile to impose bans on impulses which are not only excusable but supremely natural.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing this, Moses, like many another reformer, tried to substitute one belief for another, one shrine for another, one altar for another, and the fact he went no further than he did is due to his realization that he could not change man, that the best that could be done to raise man's spiritual level was to impose belief in one all-wise and all-powerful God of Justice whose worship would satisfy the religious instincts without recourse to archaism.

That he succeeded, at least in part, few will deny, but too much folklore remained and worse, an almost primitive system of rewards and punishments exposed it, as we shall see, to dangers he himself could hardly have anticipated.

#### AN UNFORTUNATE WEAKNESS IN MOSAIC MONOTHEISM

In the beginning these archaic traits which survived in Mosaism may have been of little importance. The god of Moses satisfied Israel's religious needs. The commandments, defining good and evil, were enough to establish a moral basis for human behaviour. Life was simple, men rude, and the Lord of hosts had redeemed his people from slavery and brought them through numberless perils into the promised land. If events did turn against them the cause must lie in their own obdurate sinfulness, their violation of Yahveh's laws. Misfortune was God's punishing hand upon them while prosperity was the reward for righteousness. This spiritualized expansion of Abraham's primitive faith was adequate for the time.

The great danger of relapse into barbaric paganism rose out of a very definite historic event, the transformation of these nomadic herdsmen into farmers settled on the land. The Hebrews, once warriors, but now peasants, looked at the Canaanitish communities all about them and were tempted by their system of nature worship. This was something completely lacking in their own religion.

Peasants will always have religious customs which differ profoundly from those of the town, and even more from those of people devoted to war. Mosaism at its inception had been the spiri-

<sup>1</sup> Gregory the Great: 'Remember that you must not interfere with any traditional belief or religious observance that can be harmonized with Christianity' (Instruction to a missionary to the Saxon heathen).

tual sustenance of soldiers who were fighting a long, long war under grim conditions. For the warrior it is morale which decides the final outcome, but the farmer is far less inclined to see a connection between his personal integrity and the result of his work. He acknowledges his dependence on weather and soil; he appeals to the kindness of the elements; he offers devotion to the mysterious powers whose benevolence will decide the outcome of his crops. Morals are decisive for men who are struggling among other men and against other men, be it in war or in social rivalry; morals are imperative for men whose success depends on the decency and reliability of each member of the group. But for those who deal with the obscure forces of nature it is more important to know how to stimulate fertility. They concentrate on the invocation of the spirits of earth and water, of wind and weather, a fact which has been crystallized in the word used to designate the believers in this nature worship, heathen.

Another peril, which reinforced this threat from the countryside, was the inevitable influence exercised by the still unconquered towns in Philistia, Syria and northern Canaan. The impressive rituals carried out in these flourishing centres could not fail to fascinate the newcomers. As commercial relations came into being, the Hebrews' intermingling with the indigenous population was inevitable, and when the rude tent-dwellers became townspeople themselves, their religious views necessarily underwent a transformation.

#### A FURTHER WEAKNESS RESULTING FROM THE COVENANT

One of the first results of this 'civilization' of the Hebrews which followed their settlement in Canaan was the quick emergence of a priestly class which began forthwith to introduce far-reaching alterations into the original religion.

A priesthood is intended to preserve faith in its purity, to offer help in spiritual troubles, and by its own conduct, to present a living example of constancy and godliness. It is of immense service to any religion, but it has its dangers, also. Priests have always been reluctant to permit the growth of any direct relationship between the worshipper and his god, often with very good reason, one of the duties of priesthood being to combat magic and religious quackery. But its motives are not always so noble. The freethinker is a potential rival and in every age has been all too apt to burn as a sorcerer. And what is more Mosaism was founded on a belief in a direct relationship between God and his people.



With the installation of the priestly profession in Israel a situation was recreated which had been summarily rejected by Moses. A sacrificial ritual was instituted, daily services initiated; the observation of feast days became such a binding obligation that any transgression was punished, sometimes by death. Ceremonies were conducted according to rules so rigid that all the dangers of pagan mechanism and materialism presented themselves again. After Solomon had erected the temple in Jerusalem (c. 1000 B.C.) the priests, now the possessors of very special political status, monopolized the religious life of the kingdom outlawing services in village and countryside. Only sacrifice in the Temple at Jerusalem was valid, and religion tended more and more to separate itself from everyday life, becoming once again a rite to be observed at special hours, in special attitudes, with special words. Instead of living their religion every hour of every day, men began to devote one part of their time to their work, and another part to the discharge of their various duties towards God.

Worse still was the fact that the complexity of the religious service made it the privilege of the few who had the time, leisure and money to deal with all its demands. God's favour became something the workman had neither the time nor the means to acquire. What was more natural than to look around for ways to remedy his plight? In Canaan the means were at hand.

A more distant result was that religion became aristocratic, and that society tended to divide itself into groups, the pure who knew the rules and observed them — those known later as the Sadducees<sup>1</sup> — and the impure, the ignorant, who were little more than 'sinners', outcasts from God's house.

But it was not only outside pressures and class differences that threatened to send Mosaism sliding back into paganism; there were dangers inherent in Mosaism itself. Its conception of monotheism, well-fitted though it was to war and to a semi-nomadic way of life, was too simple at this stage to satisfy the doubts of a society given more and more to scepticism and philosophical speculation.

<sup>1</sup> Sadducee, the Hebrew *Zduki*, a derivative of *Zaddic* which means righteous; only their own doctrine, according to their view, represented complete loyalty to the Torah; Pharisaism was heterodox, a wicked distortion of the true ideals of Jewish religion and social life. Needless to say, the Sadducees were the aristocrats and conservatives.

The derivative from Zadok, the first high priest, appears erroneous. This seems to be confirmed by recent finds among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Children of Zadok these scrolls refer to were clearly the priests of the Qumran sect, one which lived in solitude and monastic austerity.

Moses was no theologian, nor were the leaders who came after him. The prophets were even less so. Their logic was a matter of instinct. They preached stubbornly that misfortune was the inevitable result of transgression; if Sennacherib wasted Palestine it was because of Israel's wrongdoing and the plunder of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar could have been prevented by a greater regard for moral decency and godliness. The same link between cause and effect governed private life. Good conduct assured health and prosperity, 'the righteous shall flourish like the palm tree' and the 'wicked shall be destroyed for ever'. Just as the physicist of today endeavours to map out nature's laws influencing life on earth, so religious 'scientists' proceeded to map out the laws according to which God governs man's destiny. One had only to know and observe these laws and God would be obliged to serve his worshippers, just as the physicist hopes that at the end of the age nature will be reduced to subservience to man.

Now when these ancient teachers set themselves to this task of codifying God's laws, they soon encountered difficulties. God was supposed to recompense man for his faithful observance of the commandments and the rules of conduct transmitted through Moses. Yet, too often reward failed and calamity appeared in its stead. Things often went quite differently from what one might have justly expected. It could not be denied, the wicked do prosper, the mighty enjoy power and pass their days in wealth; at the same time the good suffer while they wait vainly for the fulfilment of the divine promises. What, then, is God's purpose — what is one to think of his commandments, of their interpretation, or perhaps — what is one to think of God himself?

#### A NEW CONCEPTION OF GOD

This problem of God's nature which presented itself to the consciousness of the Hebrew world finds poetic expression in the Book of Job, probably a fifth-century work. Though deeply devoted to his religion, Job is apprehensive and afflicted. Since God is the first cause and man his servant — a meek, righteous and submissive servant — it can only be that God from time to time indulges himself in capricious moods in which, as it seems, he arbitrarily puts his most faithful subjects on the rack. From a purely judicial point of view there was no justice in God's acting as he did towards a man as strict and as self-critical as Job. 'What right,' asks Job of God in a direct colloquy, 'What right have you to do this to me?'

Here we see theology being born. God's actions have to be



explained, man's relation to his god realistically defined, and the god who emerged from these studies is a very different and infinitely loftier being than the simple, almost human Yahveh who had revealed himself to Moses on Sinai, nearly a millennium before. The primitive form of monotheism, in which man could be sure of his rights and God was seen as a chief who fought at man's side and promoted man's welfare, gradually gives way until the surviving religion is one in which God in his designs and bounteousness is far above man's comprehension, and only occasionally responsive to his wishes. To trace this theological evolution through the sacred books is not only arresting, it introduces one to ideas which were still eagerly debated in Jesus' day, and to which many gospel texts refer.

One of the earliest explanations advanced to account for the cruelty of destiny holds that God is anxious to prove the steadfastness of his people. That is why he 'brings them into temptation', that is, temptation to turn against him. Thus, in Genesis 22, 1 and 2, God 'tempts' Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a test of Abraham's obedience. The divine command seems to fall out of nowhere, and to be accepted as capricious and unmotivated; strict silence is preserved with respect to the archaic rule of Exodus 34 which required the first-born son to be devoted to the deity. Compare this with the extra-biblical Book of Jubilees (c. 300 B.C.) which gives another version of the same incident. Here it is Mastema, chief of the spirits of evil, and thus identical with Satan, who 'tempts' the hapless father to perform the old pagan rite.

This introduction of a spirit of evil opposed to the divine goodness is something new in Hebrew thinking. Up till now God's will has been the sole cause for events happening as they did happen. He lets men turn evil; he even tempts them to evil. We read that Yahveh for his own mysterious reasons makes Pharaoh's heart stubborn; it is Yahveh who tempts David to count his people; Yahveh who sends a lying spirit to Ahab's prophets so that they may seduce the king. Yahveh even tempts Isaiah, and the 2nd Isaiah himself makes God say (in chapter 45, 6-7):

'I am the Lord and there is none else. I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil.'

However, as thinking advanced, it began to be difficult to believe that a God of Justice and Righteousness could also be a tempter, the seducer of his people. It seemed impossible to love one's Maker with all one's soul and with all one's strength and with all one's mind if this Maker did good and evil indiscriminately, if with a single stroke, without any recognizable motive,

he might choose to destroy everything a man had built up in a long life of faithfulness and endeavour. If one could not trust the Father, why not turn to the Baals who were said to be so steadfast and to work such dependable miracles for their worshippers?

This growing coolness towards Yahveh forced the theologians to mend their bridges, and we find them introducing the idea of an adversary, one who worked on man both from within and without. Their inspiration was the Iranian theology in which Ahura-mazda, the god of light, was for ever at war with Angramainyu (or Ahriman in Assyria), the spirit of evil. One result of this new importation is the many instances in which the sacred books give two versions of the same event, one setting forth the episode in terms of the earlier dogma, the other telling it in the light of later thought.

Take for example the numbering of Israel, an act specifically forbidden by the Law, an event presented to us twice, first in the older Samuel and then in the Chronicles of the second century B.C.:

2 Samuel 24, 1

And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.

1 Chronicles 21, 1

And Satan stood up against Israel and provoked David to number Israel.

In the old text God is the cause of David's crime while in the new account Satan is the agent whose malice corrupts David's heart.

But then theology went further. Satan's own personality became the subject of speculation. His character undergoes a development readily apparent if we compare fifth-century texts with the views of later books. In the opening chapter of Job, for example, Satan's role is merely to report man's wrongdoing to God; in a sense he is God's attorney-general. Then, in the course of time, he comes to personify evil in open conflict with God, and presently he develops yet another aspect. Satan is the representation of matter. This distinction between matter and God, who is spirit, makes it possible for man to scorn the materialistic values of this world and aspire for a more spiritual status.

After this last step is taken, the greatest difficulty in explaining human misery and the apparent cruelty of destiny is erased. Even if Satan is not conceived as a person, he is thought to be 'part of this world' and associated with all the evil inseparable from life on earth. After that God can be loved and trusted again. The old

notion that immediate material advantage is the reward of righteousness can be abandoned. God is not only supreme; God is free. Man's worth is naught and the good that comes his way is undeserved. The old Hebraic ideology, essentially materialistic up to this point, now develops some of the noblest concepts ever engendered, concepts such as those laid down in the 2nd Isaiah and in the Psalms. God is addressed as the helper of man, a loving father who is ready to give spiritual aid to his children.

'Shew me thy ways, O Lord, teach me thy paths;  
Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my  
salvation: on thee do I wait all the day  
Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy loving kindnesses.  
Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions:  
according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness' sake,  
O Lord ...'

(Psalms 25)

This is a long step from Job's indignant clamour for the rights he thinks are his. And the changing attitude towards God is even more manifest in the book of Chronicles which dates from the second century B.C. Listen to the way in which David's farewell to life is retold, how all credit is disclaimed for the victory won, for the worshipper's courage and thrift which made possible the building of God's temple. Everything, even these virtues, is due to God and God alone.

'Blessed be thou, Lord God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine: thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all.<sup>1</sup>

Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all ... But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given ... For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers ...'

(1 Chronicles 29, 10-15)

A hymn of humility and an expression of attachment to God such as this had never before been spoken. No longer do we hear the claims of blood relationship with the Almighty or of the right of a chosen people to occupy a land which had been promised to them: man is a stranger 'before thee', a guest on the earth, and all

<sup>1</sup> There can hardly be a doubt that it is from these lines that the closing verse of the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer has been drawn.

he possesses, be it the fruits of his labour or the merits or virtuous living, all these are wholly due to the grace of God.

What is more, the earthly paradise of the prophets is no longer visualized as a Jerusalem supreme among the nations. Instead it is to follow upon the birth of a hero, a child of David's line coming from Bethlehem-Ephrata (Micah 5, 2-3), one 'who is little among the thousands of Judah'; and this kingdom is to be unlike anything conceivable in earthly terms — a heavenly kingdom (Daniel 7, 14). In the later books man is not only willing but anxious to surrender his contractual rights with God, he is content to raise his eyes in contemplation of a splendour which is the one real promise, the one sure promise which has been given him.

#### RELIGIOUS PAGANISM

But while the best of their thinkers and poets were speculating on the nature of God's being, the mass of the Hebrew people still practised their religion with wealth and health as an end. Stubbornly they clung to the traditional covenant and to the Law which bound God even if it also shackled them. The father being what he was, the children were determined to hold him to his bargain.

Originally the Jewish people had been filled with a real and motivated gratitude for having received the Law from God through Moses, a Law which had given them an exalted place among the nations. Moral purity, the humanity of their legal code, the respect they had for anything and everything outside the self, singled them out, raised them above the barbaric egoism of the surrounding heathen and confirmed them in the certainty that they were elect, set apart, 'sacred', in a sense the elite, the gentlemen of a rude and boorish world. This feeling still lingers in the mind of the orthodox Jew who today as much as ever looks down upon what he regards as the depraved lawlessness of the rest of mankind.

It is deplorable, then, that this honest gratitude should have been subjected to such crass modification, that the Jew should have come to be grateful, not for the morality of the Law, but for possessing the Law as a technique given him by God. By slow degrees gratitude for the Law became gratitude for a code which set down in black and white what was good and what was evil — good and evil being understood in the ancient pagan sense. They were grateful, in other words, for being given divinely established rules which could procure great benefits for those who observed them.

It was as if the old taboo:

'Thou shalt not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'

had been abolished, and God himself, through Moses, had given this forbidden knowledge to his beloved people. The commandments, together with the more elaborate regulations of Leviticus, became the long-sought talisman with which the individual might obtain anything he wished. The code taught him the 'good' way to act — that is, the way to accomplish the greatest good for himself, to increase his strength, safety, holiness, and merit in God's eyes, the way to assure himself of God's protection. Despite its ethical nature, the covenant was converted into an unethical instrument with which the divinity might be coerced, a development which stripped Moses' religion of the very thing that made it unique and great. As Schopenhauer once remarked, if one is only seeking to do something for oneself there is little difference between the offering of a sheep and the offering of a cherished pleasure to the deity: the motive is the same. Thus the Mosaic Law, which had in its apodictic rules laid down the sharpest known rejection of paganism, was now itself interpreted in a frankly paganistic fashion.

'Honour thy father and mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.'

These words which originally carried the threat of death to whomsoever transgressed the command, also suggest a technique by which simple folk may come to enjoy long life. Furthermore by observing all the other multifarious rules one may rightly expect health, wealth and success. The wording of Deuteronomy 6, in which certain of the commandments are reiterated, even seems to encourage this popular interpretation; the same kind of language is used over and over, 'that thy days may be prolonged', 'that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily', 'that thou mayest go in and possess the good land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers'.

All the ancient exhortations for decency and honour were turned around. It had been said that one must treat a stranger well, that one should not be an unrighteous witness, that one should bring back one's enemy's ox when it had gone astray, but now these precepts were applied against God himself. Job could indict the Lord for his injustice by saying that he

'had treated kindly the poor and the widow, he had given water to the weary to drink, he had been righteous in all ways.'

Job feels that these acts have given him a right to protection. He had clothed himself with sanctity: consequently he should be treated as sacred.

Of course those who neglected the Law, were considered to be branded in God's eye. We have already mentioned the division of the people into the exclusive group of the 'pure' and the great mass who through ignorance or 'immorality' were unclean. Contact with the unclean was to be avoided; it could contaminate the pure, and references to this class distinction, which was much more than a mere social distinction, are found throughout the New Testament. Repeatedly Jesus states that he has been sent to the sick and the sinners, by which he meant that great body of unfortunates who had no access to God, those who were, from the Pharisean, and even more from the Sadducean, point of view lost, unclean, even dangerous.

One further evil, a direct result of the 'covenant' and one of the most pernicious notions to afflict mankind, one that still raises its head in the society of our own day, was the identification of sickness with sin, of misfortune with transgression. The man stricken by adversity was not let off with the suffering that came from the evil turn of events itself; in addition he was scorned by his fellow humans as one whom the outstretched finger of God had marked as 'evil'. According to the inexorable pagan logic he was considered to be the object of divine anger, to have done something very wicked; he was therefore — to use Job's words — 'abhorred by his friends, treated as a stranger by his own wife and servants, hated by those he loved' (Job 18). And simultaneously with this custom of treating the sick man as an outcast, 'cures' for sickness along the old pagan lines reappeared; the sick man had sinned, he must mend his ways; and deaf to Job's pleas that he had failed in nothing, that nothing could be held against him, his 'friends' endlessly reiterate their threadbare advice. Needless to say those who were healthy and prosperous held their heads very high; their good fortune was the unmistakable mark of God's favour, and they carried about them an aura of holiness, of mystical distinction and of wisdom which, to all appearances, bore the sanction of God himself.

#### COMPARISON WITH 'A DOLL'S HOUSE'

There is still another danger which threatens to undermine any high religion. It was implicit in Judaism, even as it has been in the older Mosaism; it emanated directly from the 'strict Father — meek child' conception with which the orthodox worshipper



pictured his relationship to God. This danger, rarely correctly appreciated, though it is still very real today, and not only in the Jewish world, has a lulling effect upon the mentality of the worshipper, and encourages him to follow his egocentric tendencies under a cover of love and humility.

In representing Yahveh as a father to his children, Moses would certainly never have anticipated that a side effect of this lofty concept would create an undesirable situation — though one of the later prophets seems to have sensed this development.

By a curious trait in his nature man confronted with a variety of situations, will always find the one among them which is in his psychology most advantageous. To the superficial observer the harshness of the Law seems to be cruel. Obedience to all its minutiae has often been considered intolerable. But eventually it turns out that even these elements of harshness and cruelty can be desirable. We have said that the Jews thanked God for giving them the Law; we have seen that they did this because it conferred upon them the privileges of the sanctified and elect, because they believed that possession of the Law enabled them to increase in merit and worth, just as the pious man of today believes that his strict conduct enhances his prestige in the religious community. In addition to all this, and in what is seemingly a paradoxical way, they actually thanked God for being the harsh and tyrannical father and for making the Law as hard and difficult as it was. We will see that they were right in this so far as their mental comfort was concerned.

A hard father may be a great burden to his young son, but experience proves that this burden can also have its advantages. A hard father actually is the easy solution for many of life's problems. One of the best expositions of this fact is to be found in a modern play, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, where a tyrannical husband and his doll-like wife live together in what is essentially a father-child relationship.

At first sight the position of the young wife seems impossible. She is treated like an ignorant child, high-handedly and often roughly, and Ibsen's presentation of the husband's despotism was so effective that a clamour went up for the improvement of the lot of the wife of his day. The infantile situation in which she lived was 'deeply humiliating', she 'ought to be emancipated', and in more than one respect the socially minded Ibsen may have been right; woman's legal position needed to be improved in many ways; but in laying all the blame at the husband's door he made one serious blunder — recognized at once by a keen observer like Strindberg. Obviously Ibsen had failed to perceive that an equal

part of the fault was due to the cunning of the little woman who deliberately cultivates her child-like role. In the play we find no mention of the manifold advantages the doll derives from letting herself be forced to be a doll, but real life teaches us what they are.

To be a doll, and just that, pays her more than one dividend. A doll is irresponsible; a just man cannot be angry with a doll who adores and fears him like a god. May not the doll rightly expect everything from this husband who is so good, so great, so clever and strong? Naturally it is his business to be generous, to give her everything she needs, and to realize for her all the wishes that she, as a doll, may rightly have. As a matter of course, the husband-father is bound to shield her from sorrow and disappointment, and she has the right to blame him for any and all mishaps that occur in the household.

Is not the attitude of the wife in *A Doll's House* very much that of the believer who does his god the honour of putting his 'trust' in him, that is, of trusting that he is good and mighty and loving, that he has complete understanding for his 'child' who is by nature so helpless and weak, and therefore won't blame him for his self-indulgence? Like the believer who looks up to his god, Nora, in return for the attention showered upon her, looks up to her husband in adoration, believing in his omnipotence (which he ought to have), in his goodness (on which she fully counts) and in his wisdom (to do the best for her).

The first consequence of such an attitude is that the love the young woman brings her mighty husband — or the children offer the mighty father — is not entirely spontaneous and pure. A secret hostility cannot fail to manifest itself in such a marriage and is usually betrayed by the sort of well-timed pinpricks which Ibsen carefully omitted in his play. The wife's feelings for her husband become charged with ambivalence. The husband is the Father, but because of his strict rules he is also the Oppressor; the doll respects him, but fears him too; in some remote corner of her heart she hates him, and occasionally in unguarded moments, she mocks him. Basically, she would like to change roles, to be the great Husband herself. In this she is very much like man who from his beginnings has wished he might be god; and like man all she can actually do is dream of her emancipation and independence, just as he dreams of conquering nature and sickness and death thereby becoming divine himself.

Impulses such as these, however, are immediately stifled. She represses her 'sinful' thoughts all the more zealously because she hopes the husband will recognize her merit in doing so and deepen his love for her.



Meanwhile — and this is the practical benefit she draws from her subordinate attitude — she need do nothing positive on her own part. Nothing that is, but have faith and adore. The great 'he' exists to accomplish everything needed for her, and if by chance he should fail her, has she not the natural right to look elsewhere for a protector? This threat of divorce is the woman's great weapon; and if we may turn to Job once more, we see that in his misery he is not far from resorting to a similar dire extremity.

As long as Yahveh is imagined to be the tyrannical father (and this is the way Christ, the Pancreator, was imagined and obeyed in the Middle Ages as he still is in much of the world today) the faithful can believe that their enemies will be punished and their own interests vigilantly protected. So long as this is so, one need do nothing more than sin not and fear the Lord, nothing more than repress one's wishes for independence and be submissive always; the Lord being good and wise will take care of everything.

On the other hand, to be mature, to assume responsibility for one's acts and to attempt the solution of one's own problems, and especially to love without hating, is something else again, and something far more difficult, be it within the limits of the household or in a man's relationship with God.<sup>1</sup>

#### DISAPPOINTMENT AND YEARNING

Historically, we have seen how the Mosaic religion gradually altered — partly as a result of causes which lie in the character of man himself and partly because of the material development of the society to which he belonged.

As previously noted the turn to city life was of great significance. Wealth and the increase in physical comfort deal a deadly stroke to austere principles. Agnosticism flourishes in the prosperous centres; God is propitiated with elaborate sacrifices but success in enterprise is none the less boldly ascribed to one's own excellence; Canaanitish wives bring the indigenous beliefs into the tents and houses of Israel; superstition supersedes religion, and the ceremonies of the Tyrian Baal eventually come to be performed side by side with the stern Mosaic ritual. The priesthood, eager to preserve its power and increase its revenue, begins to develop a ceremonial show calculated to compete with the colourful services rendered to the Syrian deities. King Jeroboam shamelessly shows the people two golden calves:

<sup>1</sup> Already during his lifetime, Jesus was forced by the people to appear as the hero, the Master with whom they might assume just such a relationship of infantile dependency. We mention the pertinent gospel passages and Jesus' reaction to these attempts in our third chapter.

'Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.'

(1 Kings 12, 28)

and Yahveh, who in Mosaic times had been conceived in wholly spiritual terms<sup>1</sup> is now 'worshipped as a molten image' (Psalms 106, 18-19). The charms and amulets so angrily rejected by Moses<sup>2</sup> come into popular use again. Sacrifices at high places, all through the country, at 'groves of oaks and elms whose shadow was good' (Hosea 4, 13) make new headway. And finally 'they sacrifice their sons and daughters unto devils' (Psalms 106, 37).

The whole prophetic movement, Amos, Hosea, Micah, all cry out against the times in a vain effort to stem the tide and call the people back to the primitive faith. The strong religious revival which follows the Babylonian exile reverses the trend momentarily and restores the Law in all its old strictness; but the simple man, surrounded by an arrogant and sceptical upper class feels his faith in a just God dwindling away, and we hear the prophet sigh:

'Ye have said: it is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?'

(Malachi 4, 14)

To all this, prophets and teachers had only one answer: observe the Law. Whoever follows the Commandments is safe, no harm can befall him, he will prosper, he will have 'families like flocks', the poor will be 'set on high from affliction', 'all iniquities shall stop their mouth', he will 'understand the loving kindness of the Lord' (Psalms 107). But the doubt among the people was not removed. History itself seemed to contradict the teaching of their holy men. In spite of faithful observance of the Law, the predicted earthly paradise had never materialized and with the passage of time seemed further and further from realization. After the Babylonian Lion came the Medic Bear and the Persian Panther; these were followed by the Beast with the ten horns (Alexander, the

<sup>1</sup> Yahveh could neither be seen nor pictured; he dwelt nowhere, was ever-present, yet could be found neither in the high place nor the temple. Whenever Moses spoke with God, God's face shone with a glory (*Kabodh*) which blinded the spectator.

In pre-Mosaic times Yahveh had been believed to go mounted on a young bull, just as many other gods of the ancient world were represented as mounted on one or another animal—a parallel often explained nowadays as the primitive recognition of the victory of the spirit over animal instinct. The 'golden calf' may well have been the young bull which originally served only as the visible pedestal for the invisible Yahveh.

<sup>2</sup> *Tephaphim*, literally 'vile things', was the name given to just these amulets.

Diadochi and the Seleucid kings) and finally the eleventh horn, Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>1</sup> Yet the Law, the Covenant, the promise of reward for strict obedience was still the only solace offered.

The exalted but narrow Pharisaism of the last centuries before Christ was an attempt to purify public morality, but though it sought to tighten the bond with God, it soon lost sight of its selfless ideal. The Pharisee expected God to do his part in exchange for the observance of his charter now newly and even more inexorably interpreted. The love and trust in God which had marked the man of the Exodus was gone, gone the blind acceptance of God's decisions, the proud resignation in the face of disaster, gone the humility after one's successes.

Some of the great teachers, able to look into man's heart, still lamented all their departures from the old faith. In deeply moving terms like those in Deuteronomy 6 they admonish us to remember God always, and especially in the days of our happiness, the days when we are blinded by success, when need seems to be non-existent; then is the time to know ourselves and to remember what a small part we actually play in gaining the prosperity we enjoy:

'When the Lord thy God brought thee into the land ... to give thee houses full of good things which thou fillest not, and wells digged which thou diggest not, vineyards and olivetrees which thou plantest not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full  
Then beware lest thou forget the Lord which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage ...'

(Deuteronomy 6, 10-12)

But even the best among them, the 2nd Isaiah in his time, could only fall back again and again on the old timeworn exhortation 'Justice, righteousness!' as if in these were the whole remedy for man's afflictions. Even the dramatic movement of the Essenes — the pure ones — as it appears from the newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls, was sterile and uninspiring. Escape from society, escape in asceticism and monastic seclusion, ritualism and rude self-chastisement, was no solution and only bearable through the hope of a better future, the hope of a messiah. Neither the purity of the Essene, the fervour of the later prophets nor the piety of the Pharisee was able to check the forces which transformed the

<sup>1</sup> Daniel 7, Vision of the 4 Beasts. The book is accepted as having been composed in the first half of the second century B.C. to enflame the Maccabean Jews' resistance against the tyrant Antiochus. It was couched in terms which would be obscure to the uninitiated but transparent enough for the oppressed.

religion of Moses into the hard formal Judaism of the Sadducees.<sup>1</sup>

In the two centuries immediately preceding our era a stalemate is reached. Hebraic theology becomes little more than a moralistic but arrogant concept of life, with man and his god facing each other on equal terms, much in the manner of two humans who have entered bona fide into a sort of commercial contract and by virtue of being parties to this contract are entitled to take action against each other in the event of any breach. Faith and a scrupulous observance of the letter of the Law enabled man to become God's equal in power. This Pharisaism was unsatisfactory to the average man, however; doubt kept gnawing at his heart, and undeserved misfortune baffled him. Where was God, how could one see God, understand God, serve God? Cult was the only answer; nothing else was possible or had ever been possible. Nothing but cult, it seemed, would ever answer his yearning, nothing but cult quench the thirst of his soul.

<sup>1</sup> Again and again honest but futile attempts were made to avoid this trap into which man stumbles whenever for his own material benefit he attempts to exploit God's rules. Antigonus of Sacho, a sopher (scribe, leader of culture) who lived during the early years of the Hellenistic period, advocated serving God without thought of reward:

'Be not like the slaves who serve their masters for the gratuity which they expect. Serve without expecting a gratuity and let reverence for God ever be upon you.'

## CHAPTER 3

### The Struggle between Cult and Religion B. The Christian Solution

#### CHRISTIANITY'S ORIGINAL APPEAL

What new element was introduced to the world by Christianity? How account for a popular response so strong that in one irresistible drive it changed the face of the Western World?

There has always been something inexplicable in the extraordinary speed with which Christianity advanced. Within a generation churches had sprung up in all the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean. By way of Antioch the movement spread to Greece and Asia Minor. Almost at the same time it made its appearance in Carthage and Alexandria. As early as the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54) Christians were active in Rome, and Suetonius<sup>1</sup> notes that that monarch expelled the Jews from the city because of the disorders stirred up among them by the followers of 'one Chrestus'. Tacitus, in a passage so typically his that it excludes the possibility of a gloss,<sup>2</sup> rages against the multiplication of this 'vile superstition' and tells how in the year 64, hardly more than 30 years after Jesus' death, Nero was persecuting the Christians as potential enemies of the state. In the south of France it had taken such an upsurge by the beginning of the second century that it was said Mary Magdalene had come there in person to found the community.

Much of this early success is paralleled in the expansion of other new religions like Buddhism and Islam, but Christianity's amazingly sustained appeal is something unique, a fact which is seldom denied even by those who deny the historic Jesus. Tenacity in the face of persecution is present from the very beginning, infiltration of all classes of society continues without interruption, and what is even more significant, already in these first centuries Christianity was displaying the same power of resistance to scepticism that it has shown to the even more pervading

<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*; Claudius XXV.

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* XV, 44.

scepticism of modern times, the same invulnerability to criticism and merciless exegesis.

It is impossible, of course, to see Christianity simply as a reaction against Judaism. Even though Jesus lived and died as a Jew in the Jewish world, and most of his words were addressed to Jews, Christianity as a movement had its first real successes in the Greek and Roman spheres, not in Judea. From the beginning it tended to be a movement of Gentiles, men barely acquainted with Jewish tradition and largely unconcerned with Jewish ways of thinking.

How then is this explosive growth to be explained? Many answers can and have been given, and for the correct understanding of many gospel texts it is important to clear up this point.

Most Christians will say with little hesitation that 'the light' and 'the truth' simply produced their logical effect, and the Church in agreement with this popular opinion, has quite naturally only one answer. Christianity conquered the world thanks to the nobility of Christian theology.

This, however, may well be doubted. From the very beginning Christianity became a religion of the masses and the masses have never cared for theology. What is more, in matters of religion, nobility, as such, appeals only to those who are trying to provide themselves with a flattering explanation for their beliefs. The average man reaches out for the things that will help him; from any religion he eagerly assimilates the healing, the effective element. We have already seen how the Mediterranean world of pre-Christian times gave itself to practical religions of the kind which asked little and promised much, and it is a very precarious hypothesis to suppose that the mentality of these people suddenly changed, that they abandoned self-interest for love of neighbour, simply because they were overwhelmed by the nobility of a new doctrine.

We must look, then, for more deep-seated causes, if we hope to learn why people deserted their ancestral altars and widely reputed methods of sanctification — the worship of Isis, the cult of Adonis, Mithraism or the Eleusinian mysteries — to follow a new doctrine promulgated by preachers who according to current standards were certainly unqualified. As a matter of fact all these religions promised much the same thing as Christianity; especially they promised purification from sin and the life everlasting. But perhaps our explanation will appear of itself if we review some of the most notable opinions uttered in the past.

One theory, which was commonly put forward, held that the Christ, unlike the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon, was

a suffering god. The idea that God had endured such trials and tragedies was, according to this view, especially appealing to the masses. This, however, cannot hold, for suffering gods were a commonplace. Mithra and Osiris both suffered. Each year at the birth of spring Osiris was sacrificed — very much like Christ — and a few days later his scattered members were put together again — in other words he was resurrected — also like Christ. Like Christ, Osiris had to remain three days in the underworld before he returned to earth again. Meanwhile Isis, his wife, watching him suffer, endured her own agony very much as did Mary, the mother. Or take the cult of Adonis. This god, too, died each spring and after enduring parallel agonies rose triumphant with the new-born year. In the face of these and other examples which might be cited, the suffering god argument loses its force.

Another view asserts that the new religion marshalled its followers because it promised that the Kingdom of God would be established soon with the expected second coming of the Christ. It is true that this advent and the establishment of the Kingdom was avidly expected; it was even expected with such certainty that it may have weakened Rome's defence against her barbarian invaders. But before the world could believe in such an event, it had first to be convinced of Christ's divinity, of the authority of his message. In other words the world had first to be converted and it is hopeless to try to explain this conversion by pointing to its result.

It was Pareto's argument that Christianity promised mankind a 'home after death' and that this was the principle cause for its rapid growth. Now it is true that the yearning for immortality was strong in the Roman world and that this yearning accounts for the fervent reception already accorded to so many oriental religions. It was the hope of eternal bliss in some Elysium that inspired most of those who worshipped at the altars of Attis, Adonis or Mithra. But the promise of a 'home' does not explain why the Romans preferred Christianity to these other popular faiths. As a matter of fact, such a 'home' is never described in the gospels proper, nor is there any allusion to it other than the use of the vague term 'the kingdom of Heaven'.

Barbusse and other revolutionary writers argue that the new movement offered liberation from the 'fetters' of ancient ritual, a fact which might possibly be true for the Jews in Palestine, but could hardly apply to the Romans in Rome where the great movement was so soon centred. As a matter of fact, the Jews proved less receptive to this liberation than the Gentiles and remained solidly attached to their ritual 'fetters'.



For d'Avenel and the many modern psychologists and sociologists who share his point of view, Jesus was a liberator in the widest sense, which explains everything to them. From an idealistic viewpoint the Christian doctrine<sup>1</sup> with its emphasis on spiritual values may be called a liberation, but it is difficult to see in what way it could have appeared as such to the people of Rome, unaccustomed as they were to self-discipline and austerity. It did not free them from their superstitions, for superstition was not abandoned by those who embraced the new faith. It did not free them from burdensome ritual requirements, for as we have already noted, these were not required by the prevailing religions. Rome demanded little of her citizens in the religious sphere; other than a perfunctory compliance with the rites of emperor worship, the inhabitants of the empire were free to worship as they chose. It is probably true that popular respect for religious institutions was in a state of general decline during these critical years, but that hardly argues that Christianity was a liberation.

Surprisingly enough Nietzsche also insisted that the new religion was a liberation, but he qualifies the term by saying that it must be understood in a very special sense. According to Nietzsche Christianity did not attempt to overthrow the existing order, it did not seek to remove the upper classes from their position of rank and power. Nevertheless its inevitable effect was to destroy the supremacy of the ruling class and this in a manner new to history — 'by a reversal of values'; that is, it reversed the meaning of what had theretofore been accepted as 'good'. Force was no longer 'good'; meekness was better. Wealth wasn't good, poverty was the right thing. Worldly success was almost sinful, while the failure found favour with his deity. Thus, as Christianity gradually established itself among the masses, the moral foundation upon which the aristocratic society rested was slowly but surely undermined. That is why Christianity for Nietzsche was the 'Sklavenaufstand in der Moral' — the slave revolt in the field of morals.

To deny the truth of this is impossible. History shows us that Nietzsche described very accurately what actually happened in the course of the succeeding centuries. One of the immediate effects of the introduction of Christianity was indeed a shifting of moral values, from self-assertion to self-effacement, from pride to humility, but whether this tendency of Christianity to undermine the old society by attacking its moral roots and by disqualifying its leaders was the cause of its explosive success is very doubtful.

<sup>1</sup> Christian doctrine must be distinguished from the teachings of Jesus. The habit of treating the two as identical is responsible for the greater part of the confusion which has clouded the interpretation of the gospels from the first.

It is certainly true that a democratic element — something like the *Liberté, Egalité* of later ages — was present in the new movement. For example no one could deny that this was the case in Jerusalem. There the preaching of the gospel was directed, obliquely but quite intentionally, at the moral domination of Jewish society by the Pharisees, who had constituted themselves as a caste, an association of 'the pure'. These individuals believed themselves to be set apart, 'saved', especially loved and protected by the deity, and in consequence they looked down on those lesser beings who were still 'of this world'. This system, dividing society into the pure and the impure, was by no means the exclusive property of the Pharisees. Such systems existed in other countries, and have reconstituted themselves again and again in the course of history. Protestantism during the last four centuries serves as an instance. There the tendency has been to segregate the pure from the impure in a way that differs little if any from the more familiar division of society into aristocrats and commoners. In certain orthodox protestant communities one inherited 'purity' exactly as one might inherit ancestral lands or a title of nobility; by birth one belonged to a special group, 'the best people in town', which is the same situation that prevailed in pre-Christian Judea. There the Sadducees would accept a man as 'elect' only if he also happened to be well-born — that is, born within the caste, in the Church as we would say today. The Christian ideal was certainly revolutionary when it wiped out these traditional distinctions, but if this was true for first century Palestine, it was not true in Rome where no such division of the people into pure and impure can be demonstrated. There the revolutionary principle worked in a very different fashion.

It is well to remember that in any time and any country the cause of social revolution is fundamentally the same, a withering of respect for the members of the ruling class and a growing contempt for the institutions that shelter them. The inefficiency, the corruption and essential uselessness of the aristocracy begins to be intolerable, while institutions as well as prejudices fail to adjust themselves to changed conditions. Contempt for the dominant group aggravated by the deterioration of economic conditions touched off the French Revolution, the Peasant revolution of Luther's day, Savonarola's upheaval in Florence, Cromwell's revolution and all the rest. The new ideas and modern methods, heretofore repressed by a decadent upper group, would now supposedly find outlets.

Now these conditions did not exist in the Rome of the first century. Eventually they did make their appearance but this was

long afterwards at a time when the inability of the Emperor and his following to defend the empire and to assure economic stability had become painfully evident to 'the common man'. During the second half of the first century, a time when Christians were already suffering persecution and martyrdom, this kind of discontent was nowhere manifest. The tone of all the surviving documents describing Rome and its atmosphere shows that a 'revolutionary' hypothesis for the rise of Christianity is artificial — that the driving force behind the movement was not economic and not political; that it was something else which must be sought in the basic Christian idea — an idea which has nothing to do with dogma or theology and which is a social idea only in the limited sense Nietzsche uses. Actually first-century Christianity affected the human condition in quite another way, one which came to the gentiles of Rome and the empire with the force of complete novelty.

This novelty did not consist in the prodigality of the promises the new sect held out to its proselytes. We have already said that other popular cults of the day offered most of the same benefits — protection, immunity, immortality — but it must also be noted that in the case of these other cults it was not always easy to acquire these benefits. One had first to undergo a succession of ritualistic acts patterned on an antiquated symbolism which had little meaning or appeal to the worshipper at the time. The rite might strike the initiate as ridiculous, or to take the case of the Mithra initiation, as unacceptably crude. One also had to pay for the initiation, often fairly large sums, and much more than the common man had to spend. Thus the poor were excluded by the cost, and the more intelligent and more sensitive were repulsed by the lack of spirituality. Under these circumstances the authenticity of the benefits might well be doubted, and here Christianity intervened preaching a heretofore undreamed of principle which none of the other systems could match, the principle that one could be 'good', that is, worthy and whole and sanctified, simply by continuing to be what one already was and by suffering what one already suffered.

The good tidings lay in the simple knowledge that being poor, being humble, being what one was, was a condition recognized and respected by the deity. God was predisposed to favour the poor and the lowly, and all the dignities of the religious world were open to them.

One had merely to declare that his sufferings were accepted willingly and meekly 'in the name of Christ', that one dedicated

one's pains to God.<sup>1</sup> The sinner, the outcast, who heretofore had been banned by society and excluded by every group, suddenly recovered his self-respect; for openly confessing his sins, the sins for which he had been ostracized, he was received with praise by his brethren; his very debasement has won him special prestige. Not only that — he was accepted by God, he had a definite place in the realm of heaven.

That this should be so should really surprise no one, for Jesus has always been presented by tradition as the common man's man. The heroes of other religions not only perform exploits of enormous courage and strength — Gilgamesh, Orpheus, Adonis are also the possessors of boundless wisdom and beauty — they are born into the upper levels of their society, sometimes the sons of gods, often the sons of kings or nobles, they are the embodiment of man's megalomaniac dreams and by that very fact essentially unreal. Jesus, on the other hand, was a villager, a carpenter, who distinguished himself only by his humble virtues, virtues which are at least to some degree within every man's reach. He was a concrete human figure with none of the characteristics of myth. A few short years before he had walked the earth, a fact men were ever ready to testify to with their blood. His humble birth made Jesus a brother to the average man, but for all of that he was 'good', blessed by the powers, even divine. Up till now the plebs had always been taught that they were contemptible, that they should be ashamed to be what they were, that the gods looked upon them with a frown. Now, they could believe in themselves, accept their humble station and their shortcomings, and fulfil their modest role with hope and pride. Even envy was no longer necessary, since Christ's God looked at men through different eyes, measuring them not by their outward appearance but according to a worth perceptible only to him. To be poor was to be 'blessed'. Christ was offering man as a gift to man: Christ was the glorification of qualities every man had or could have, and in his person demonstrated possibilities exceeding anything that had ever been dreamed of by the ancient world. Christ was a revelation of man to himself.

Even today the Christian ideal can exert the same kind of power. For example consider the following missionary report from India:

'The Bible in India, especially among Indian victims of the Hindu caste system, is a liberator. How often have I seen depressed-

<sup>1</sup> The late Pope Pius XI did exactly this upon his deathbed thus setting a modern example of Christian resolution.

class Hindus respond to the message of the Bible! Having been told that they were a worthless, degraded people unfit even to enter the temples of their religion, they have learned from the Word of God that they are beloved of Heaven and called to serve the purpose of God among their fellow men.

One man I knew was in his youth a typical outcast, an Untouchable, accepting without protest the disabilities that Hinduism imposed upon him and his kind. Through his first contact with Christians he developed resentment against the oppression ... For a while he was filled with hatred for his oppressors, but eventually he came to understand the Christian message and accepted Christ as his Lord. Then his *sense of hatred changed to a sense of mission*. This made him a fervent lay evangelist, and through his influence converts have been won to Christ, not only among those who have suffered as he suffered, but among their oppressors.'

(*Record of the Bible Society*, vol. 101, 6, p. 89)

This man's emotion, his motives, his passionate devotion cannot be so very different from that of first-century Christians.

The rise of Christianity, then, should not be explained away as an attempt to reverse the social order.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, we should remember that the new convert despised advancement and good fortune, and was only too willing to permit the great of this world to remain in what he would have called their unenviable position. Every scholar who makes a conscientious study of the first century finds that the structure of society is not enough to 'explain the conditions under which Christianity grew into men's minds as a new power',<sup>2</sup> and comes sooner or later to a conclusion similar to the one Fowler has put so well:

'... the new religion was itself morality, but morality consecrated and raised to a higher power than it had ever yet reached. It becomes active instead of passive ...'

Man could now turn aside from the threadbare figures of myth — Orpheus, Venus, the Magna Mater, Mithra and all the other examples of heroism, fabulous greatness and stupendous suffering that had been presented to him heretofore. Humanity could take inspiration from a man of failure, a man who had been rejected and persecuted from the beginning, one whose death had been the death of the ignoble, and whose agony was in many of its

<sup>1</sup> In that sense Wilh. Wundt was right in saying that Christianity triumphed through its moral of humility.

<sup>2</sup> Fowler, *Religious Experience of the Roman People*, MacMillan, 1911.

aspects all too much like the agony of any hard-pressed human.<sup>1</sup> If in addition the chance was offered for every humble man to become exalted by means within his reach, to become great in the eyes of the One who really counted, these were tidings that could really be called good.

The growing enthusiasm was further stimulated by the doctrine of the transience and worthlessness of earthly life, a life which was already a wretched one for the slave and little more than that for the majority of free men. Not only was it unnecessary for man to be shamed by his inability to cope with this miserable life, he could actually gain eternal glory by throwing it away, and the sight of the martyrs going joyfully to their deaths was like a pillar of fire guiding these new children of Israel to a new fatherland. In the Roman catacombs we see the last resting-places of early bishops who were martyred only days after their consecration, and yet we know by other tombs that in the face of this example their places were taken by other believers who promptly suffered in their turn. No one can help but be impressed by the ring of enthusiasm which runs through the inscriptions on these tombs.

In Lyons, a thriving centre of the new movement during the second century, the persecution took even fiercer forms, and the conduct of that congregation shows better than anything else the depth of the faith that was transforming the world. Renan in his *Marcus Aurelius* (pp. 305-20) gives a description based on records of the time.

'First, the Christian population was put under quarantine. They were forbidden to show themselves in the baths, in the markets, or at the end in any public place. When one was seen, he was beaten, dragged, stoned, while the police failed to interfere.<sup>2</sup> Finally all Christians were arrested ... Their greatest anxiety, however, was not fear for the torture that awaited them, but fear that some of them would deny the Christ.'

While they awaited the day that would send them to the arena, the monstrous tortures inflicted on them seem only to have exalted

<sup>1</sup> Too often Christian teaching blurs the facts of Jesus' death as they were originally recorded. Jesus' fate is actually a perfect example of the poor man's fate — dying unknown, alone, abandoned by followers and friends alike, and with the almost certain knowledge that his mission has failed, his work come to naught, and that his memory was to be blotted out. That Jesus never wavered under these circumstances is one of his greatnesses least recognized by orthodox teaching.

<sup>2</sup> This procedure is typical of persecutions carried on with the connivance of government. Under Hitler the Jews endured almost identical treatment. Even the motives put forward to justify it were practically the same.



their ardour. 'They seemed barely half-sensible. They believed that divine water flowed from Jesus' wounds to cool their own. Christ was suffering in them and this idea filled them with a pride which turned even the weakest among them into superhuman beings.

'The deacon Sanctus showed a courage which stupefied those who saw it. When the torturers tried to make him speak, hoping thereby to extract some statement on which they could base an accusation against the rest of the community, they did not even succeed in making him identify himself or state his name ... "Christianus sum" was his only answer. This was his name, his nationality, his race, his everything ... His body was one single bloody mass, twisted, convulsed, no longer resembling the human form, but still he went on living ... The next day, when the executioners started it all over again hoping either to make him speak or to see him die miserably, Sanctus would neither speak nor die. His followers took these powers of endurance as a miracle and drew courage from them when they joined him in the arena.'

The steadfastness of the little slave-girl Blandine on this occasion has come down in history as an example of courage which approaches the truly miraculous. Blandine belonged to a Christian woman who had initiated her into the faith. 'The consciousness of her low estate,' says Renan, 'excited in her the wish to equal her masters in courage, and the knowledge that God often takes pleasure in choosing the weak and the ugly to humiliate beauty and strength made her yearn to meet the executioners. So small and fragile that her fellow-prisoners trembled lest she be forced to renounce her faith, she surpassed them all in endurance so that even the torturers grew wearied of their work. They could not understand how her pierced and disjointed body could still go on breathing, since any one of the tortures used on her should have been enough to kill a normal person. As they started their work again the next day, they found her confessing Christ as loudly as ever. 'I am Christian. In the world of Christians one does not do evil,' and from these words she seemed to derive new vigour and new energy for renewed ordeals ...

'In the end she was taken to the arena along with Sanctus and those other prisoners who had not succumbed to their tortures. While they were attaching what remained of her body to the stake, she never ceased to pray, nor removed her eyes from heaven. The lions turned away from her and the other martyrs took it as a sign. Blandine's stake appeared to them as Jesus' cross, and her poor little body as a symbol of the Pascal lamb ... The beasts having left her unharmed the whole day, they had to take her back to the



prison ... There during the remaining days of the "feast" they made her witness the torture of the other Christians and then she was taken to the arena again along with her one surviving companion, a boy of 15. Blandine treated him like her child, ever encouraging him, and attentive to him to his end. At last she alone remained, the last of all the prisoners, triumphant and bathed in joy. After flagellation, the red-hot chair and the beasts, they had her still living body tossed on the horns of a bull, but her mind was lost to earthly pain and already she was tasting the heavenly beatitude. The executioner finally had to end it with his sword.'

In these and many similar descriptions we find the best evidence of the power the young religion exerted on the mind of its converts: the certainty of bliss, the pride in being thus exalted, the escape from a wretched earthly existence, the hope of finding in another world all things denied in this one, and last but not least the joy of being united with the cherished divine being.

Far from being deterred by the persecutions, the congregations of the Western world took confidence and encouragement from these examples set them by their martyrs. Such faith and steadfastness was taken as proof of the authenticity of the gospel. What their apostles had promised was now a certainty for them. Pain and suffering, even if endured ingloriously, in secret, far from the eyes of the world, were no longer meaningless evils. Frustration, suffering, humiliation, all conferred virtue. They opened the door to divine grace, a place in heaven, a seat among the elect. 'Happy the hearts that are pure, because they shall see God', was one of the verses that conquered the world. And the unfeeling, tyrannical gods that had ruled thus far, those despots so much alike in character with the temporal rulers of earth, were now superseded by a god of kindness, a father in the true sense, the heavenly father unknown to pagans and so often forgotten by rabbinical bigotry, the father understanding and forgiving, who

'pitieth his children, knowing their frame, remembering that they are dust ...'

(Psalms 103)

God, as discovered now, was the true, everlasting friend. No longer did the believer walk in loneliness. God saw into his heart, weighing each act and thought, noting the good and punishing the bad. God appreciated those secret virtues that society ignored. God's never-failing presence sustained the Christian through all his days, just as it had sustained his martyrs in their hour of agony. Life was transformed; each minute had meaning now, meaning so deep that the days of the dullest man, of the simplest woman, were

filled with light and shone forth with poetic radiance. Life ceased to be limited either in scope or in time. From being a process of gradual but steady deterioration earthly existence now became an act of creation and of steady growth, the raising of a noble building, with the Christian himself as architect and God the critic. Even if the house were not completed, even though it made no more than a humble beginning, the effort was acceptable and the work would be perfected in the life to come.

#### FIRST CULTIC INFLUENCES AND RESULTING OBSCURATION

If one would understand the development of the new faith and of the texts as they have come down to us, it is well to remember that not all Christian converts were saints or martyrs inspired by the will to glorify their lives in self-denial and humility. We must bear in mind that the masses of those days were haunted by one wish above all, the wish for immortality, and that this wish found its gratification in the unique, historical basis of the new religion, that is, in Christ's earthly life, death and resurrection. This brings us to the first great problem which faced the missionary preachers of the gospel.

These missionaries were soon forced to face the fact that the pagan way of thinking had by no means been swept away, and that in one manner or another the new faith must meet the demands of its adherents even if these demands clashed at certain points with the original doctrine.

Most of the cults competing with Christianity based their promise of resurrection on the notion that their initiation ceremonies communicated some miraculous virtue to the *myste*, a sort of invulnerability or guarantee of eternal life.<sup>1</sup> Serapis and Adonis were gods who had died and then raised themselves from the dead; *ergo*, they could raise up others. This miracle would be shared by the neophyte who observed the rules.

But as we have said, it was very difficult for a human to identify himself with shadowy beings such as Serapis or Adonis, and yet this identification was the very basis of the 'saving' technique. Jesus, on the other hand, was a man who had lived, and identification with him was easy and inspiring. Yet, a difficulty arose here, too, a most perplexing one. If, like Serapis and Adonis, Jesus could give his followers immortality, then he too must be more than

<sup>1</sup> Traces of this archaic conception of the mystery are to be found in the ritual of certain Christian sects. In baptism the 'new birth' is believed to be achieved 'not by the will of man, by his culture or character, but wholly by the power of the Holy Spirit, and in a fashion above our comprehension'. Eternal life is instantaneously given 'as a gift of God.'

human; in fact he must, of necessity, be divine, a god himself. According to paganistic thinking this postulate was inescapable. Proofs of his divinity were not hard to find; living men were ready to testify that they had seen him work his miracles; change water into wine, multiply loaves and fishes, cure the blind and the palsied, yes, even raise men from the dead, and the need for assurance on this point was so imperious that an emphasis on the divinity of Jesus soon thrust into the foreground of the preaching, superseding much of the other available gospel material.

All the evidence which survives from these early times indicates this need to see Jesus as god. The early Christian writings, and even more those revealing sculptures which decorate many of the ancient Christian sarcophagi, tend to deprive Jesus of his human qualities and make him walk like a god through all the episodes of his life. We see him going to his death proud, head erect, without apprehension or pain. He towers above the soldiers who are leading him. The thorns crown him as a king. Nailed to the cross he is serene. Centuries, more than a millennium, will pass before an emphasis on Jesus' suffering makes its appearance in art, literature and human thinking.

This tendency to deify Jesus, to deprive him of his human attributes and mould him into the form of the other miracle-working gods, cuts across the current that had been carrying the new movement to its first great successes. Here we see contradictory needs and contradictory ideals merging themselves into Christianity, and a Christology based on pagan thinking establishing itself long before the formulation of the religion could be completed. The wish to obtain virtue and immortality along the traditional cultic lines soon coloured all the facts of Jesus' life, his ancestry, his words and doctrine. The new Christologists set themselves to the task of adapting all these facts to their own pattern of supernatural symbolism.

It is impossible to do justice to the original texts or to Jesus' words and parables, if one fails to take this imperative early tendency into account. It is already the dominant theme by the time St John's gospel appears. The best scholarship still dates John around A.D. 120, perhaps 30 years after the latest of the synoptics, and considers the book to be a reinterpretation of Jesus in theological terms rather than a factual account of his life and sayings. Jesus' divinity is at all times stressed in unequivocal terms;<sup>1</sup> but as if the material of this gospel were not enough for the congregations, a mass of apocrypha and 'commentary' emphasised

<sup>1</sup> Further about John, see p. 114.

zing this same tendency began to grow up outside the canonical writings. It accumulated in such quantity, that the young church was obliged to put a stop to the manufacture of 'evidence' that could only be detrimental to the doctrine itself.<sup>1</sup>

A certain amount of this mysticism also contrived to make its way into the synoptics, intertwining itself with the original text and at many points obscuring it. Relying on some of these cryptic verses certain fathers of the early Church developed their theories of salvation, taking the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus as their point of departure. With this life took on a new significance. In Christian art it soon became customary to represent the tree of life as growing out of Jesus' tomb.<sup>2</sup> This idea of life proceeding from death was worked out almost from the start by the Christologists. In John's gospel the tree of life is taken to be identical with the cross, and in many pictures Jesus' tomb is located at the very foot of the cross. Chronology is reversed, as it were. Life and power — eternal life — are now thought of as springing up directly from Jesus' sacred and sacrificed body.

To the practical mind all this may seem a matter for speculation by mystics and dreamers, but the young church knew better. It knew that the problem of death must be met, and squarely met, and so Christology was forced to go one step further in its elaboration of the mystic significance of Jesus' death. Certain primitive paintings represent this in a very significant way; in these pictures the cross does not stand over the resting-place of Jesus, but at a spot where another and more ancient tomb already exists. This other sepulchre is the tomb of Adam,<sup>3</sup> and the idea behind its representation runs parallel to Augustine's lines in which Jesus is called the second Adam. This is a thought that has been extensively developed in more modern times by Pascal and other religious philosophers.

That Jesus' life should be intimately related to the life of the first man is a matter of much greater moment than might appear at first glance. Actually, the connection is almost inescapable for anyone who regards death as unnatural, a thing that has come into the world through man's own fault, a consequence of his sin. In order to be consistent the man who adheres to such a theory

<sup>1</sup> Further about apocrypha, see pp. 103-4.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally the tree in these pictures is very reminiscent of the pillars and 'groves' which were worshipped in ancient Syria and Palestine as symbols of power.

<sup>3</sup> The Metropolitan Museum in New York possesses a Byzantine ivory of the tenth century representing the cross springing from Adam's body.

must accept the fact that life, eternal life, is only to be had by reversing the process out of which death arose, by destroying sin. If the cause that originated death disappears, death too must disappear.

So far this is pure mathematics. But here the theologian encountered a difficulty. According to the scripture the sin that brought death into the world is not ordinary sin, a transgression any human could perpetrate. It is 'original sin', the sin of Adam for which the curse of God is laid upon him and mankind. *Ergo*, only God can remove this curse from mankind; *ergo*, Jesus must in some manner be God himself; and one conclusion leading to another, it is necessary to accept the further fact that God's purpose in manifesting himself on earth could only have been to remove from mankind the taint of Adam's transgression. Now it becomes clear why Jesus' cross is shown rising out of Adam's tomb; it is because Jesus has taken Adam's sin upon himself thus becoming in the most literal sense the new Adam. Not only does he, like the ancient scapegoat, take all our actual sins upon himself, but as the new Adam his sacrificial death offers man the means of purifying himself from original sin, and by that fact abolishes the inevitability of death.

The contradiction between this conception of the divine Jesus and the other view that he was a humble man, a man of sorrow<sup>1</sup> who suffered rejection and a shameful death seems irreconcilable. A god, who descends to earth for the sole purpose of cleansing his creation of the sin he himself had originally willed, may be difficult to imagine; it is a question one must eventually leave to the theologians. But what concerns us and what concerned the believers of the first century is the notion that a god would hardly have suffered what a man suffers, and more particularly that he would hardly have suffered it in the same way. Jesus' human nature up until then had been the driving force of the new religion, and undeniably the kernel of its greatness; it could hardly be given up, and yet at least in part it had to be given up.

Since the assurance of immortality had become the one great necessity, this contradiction imposed upon the new faith was also imposed on the text of the gospels. By the time they appeared in final form, this duality in representation, this conflict of conception, was already so much a part of the faith, and so solidly cemented into the new doctrine, that not only John, but even the synoptics had had to work it in somehow.

It is evident that such ideas, grafted on to the texts to accord with the needs of this earliest theology, must lead to confusion

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53, 3.

in interpreting the words actually spoken by Jesus and of the examples given by him to illustrate his doctrine.

#### SOME PROBLEMS OF THE GOSPEL TEXTS

Quite apart from this fundamental contradiction concerning the nature of Jesus, which was forced upon the primitive church, the gospels display another set of contradictions, what one might call purely factual contradictions. Some of these are obvious to anyone, others so elusive that they escape all but the most careful reader, but simple or complex they have plagued students of the Bible ever since the canon was established.

The most puzzling of these arise when we encounter inconsistent statements within the same gospel, or when a passage in one of the gospels fails to agree with a corresponding passage in another. The greatest difficulty — the true *vexata questio* — is to explain why the authors of the synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke, would permit these contradictions to stand unreconciled, for it is impossible to believe that these inconsistencies could have escaped the attention of the authors. Through the course of twenty centuries, the best efforts of scholar and exegete have been devoted to the attempt to clear up this problem.

One widely accepted hypothesis is that the original gospels (whether written down or still in oral form) were known so well that any extensive alteration was impossible, that the material, even as transmitted by word of mouth from scholar to scholar, was soon regarded as consecrated. That the infant church should be willing to rely on word of mouth transmission should not be surprising to us, for in the Palestine of the first century much religious dogma was never put into written form. It was considered unnecessary, for as Albright puts it 'writing was used in antiquity largely as an aid or guide to memory, not as a substitute for it'.<sup>1</sup> Following this tradition the Mishna and the Gemara were transmitted orally, and to take a case outside Palestine, the Rġveda, composed c. 1200 B.C., was only reduced to writing in the fifth century after the Brahmi script had been adapted from its Persian-Aramaic prototype.

The reasons why the gospels were finally committed to writing will be discussed later, but we can be very sure that before their first lines were traced out on papyrus their content was known to many. If this seems improbable, recall that as recently as the nineteenth century it was nothing unusual for a scholar to know

<sup>1</sup> W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, John Hopkins: Oxford, 1946, p. 33.



the New Testament by heart, and even to be able to recite it backwards. As late as World War II Jewish students in Eastern Europe often memorized large portions of the scriptures, in extreme cases even the entire Bible and the Talmud.

So much for the views of those who maintain that the text was established so early that extensive alteration was impossible. Closer consideration forces this theory to give ground and even makes it appear as improbable. Too many facts have come to light which prove that even the earliest editions had already been subjected to extensive textual revisions, and that these rewritings had been undertaken before any complete and accurate knowledge of the gospels could have possibly become common property. This forces us again, and with better reason now, to ask why these first authors, the evangelists, did not attempt to accomplish a greater concordance between their works — at least in the case of the synoptics — and more particularly why they failed in this respect when dealing with matters of fact.

One obvious possibility is that the gospels were written at different times, possibly in different places, and still more possibly by men who were out of touch with each other. This theory, that each gospel had an independent origin, was accepted generally in times when scholars had neither the material nor the knowledge we possess. Today all authorities agree on one point; that Mark's gospel is the oldest and was known to the other evangelists. Most modern scholars (Holtzman and the greater part of the protestant theologians) agree further that Matthew and Luke composed their texts with knowledge of the following documents:

1. The gospel of Mark;
2. The so-called Q (Q: Quelle), a first-century life of Jesus now lost but which is generally admitted to have existed;
3. A few independent 'sayings' of Jesus which circulated on scrolls.

Yet, with these common sources to work with the Evangelists were unable to avoid the most flagrant contradictions — as in the chronology of Jesus' life, the factual details of the Passion, his answers before the court and his exclamations on the cross, to name only a few.

Exegetes have been struggling with this problem from the day exegesis began. Their opinions, at least the most plausible of them, fall into the following groups:

- I. The evangelists were actual eye witnesses of the events they recounted.



This point of view has been skilfully defended by psychologists like Binet-Sanglé who explained the discrepancies between the narratives in the three gospels by citing as a parallel the different versions which three hypothetical Napoleonic officers might have given of the campaign in Russia. Such officers might logically give three completely different accounts of the very battles in which they had all participated.

This convenient theory, still cherished by a great body of believers, has been almost universally abandoned by scholars. No modern student believes that any of the evangelists (with the possible exception of Mark) could have seen Jesus in the flesh. Certain verses in Matthew (for instance the beginning of Matthew 22) and in Luke (19, 41-4; 21, 20-4) show irrefutably that these gospels, or at least these verses, could not have been composed until after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

If neither Matthew nor Luke was drafted until some 40 years after Jesus' death, it is more reasonable to conjecture that they were based on the reports of eye-witnesses than to suppose that they were composed by the eye-witnesses themselves.

II. Neither Matthew nor Luke had a written text before him as he wrote and these two synoptics were conceived according to the purely verbal tradition. This would allow for many inaccuracies.

This hypothesis must also be rejected because of three undeniable facts:

(a) All three gospels fall into the same unusual language in certain passages, a coincidence which can only be explained by assuming that these passages were abstracted from an existing written source.

(b) They all commit certain mistakes at the same points, none of them making any attempt to correct or to clarify them.

(c) They tell certain stories and report certain 'blocks of sayings' in the same confused order, although the steps necessary to eliminate much of the confusion must have been apparent.

From the purely objective point of view it is inadmissible that the same incongruities, the same mistakes, the same confusion could have crept in had the authors not been using common written sources.

III. While permitting certain passages to stand as they found them in the earlier documents, the evangelists allowed themselves certain liberties — what we would call today the use of 'creative imagination' — and thereby introduced the discrepancies referred to.

For various reasons this last explanation seems the best. For example, we can be sure that the gospels are not chronicles. The style, the confused organization and chronology, indicate this sufficiently. We have only to compare them with any 'story' of the time,<sup>1</sup> or better yet with the kind of writing we find in Acts or in Paul's epistles which are continuous recitals, fluent at least to some degree; but the gospel text is now a narrative, then halts to teach, halts again to attack some irrelevant opinion, and then repeats in different words what has already been related in the preceding narrative passage. At the same time it is so silent on many important episodes that we can only presume the author had other ends than the recording of events. It is most probable the gospels were written as manuals for instruction — as the Interpreter's Bible puts it — 'to strengthen and deepen the faith of congregations who were already well acquainted with the main facts of Jesus' life'. With this end in mind the authors sought to give their readers the most vivid picture of Jesus that was possible and at the same time to underscore those things about Jesus and his teaching which seemed to them to have the greatest importance for their pupils as well as for posterity. 'By drawing the man and his teaching together into one indissoluble entity they sought to make their gospels indelible.'

The disregard for unity and unconcern for concordance is valuable negative proof that the aim was not to record, not to write history; on the other hand many passages demonstrate positively that the intention was to instruct, to refute and to underscore, and to accomplish each of these according to the particular views and convictions of the author. One striking example is to be found in the variations between Matthew and Mark-Luke as they report Jesus' colloquy with the Rich Young Man.

Mark, admittedly the oldest version, has in 10, 17-18 the young man ask:

'Good master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life! And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.'

Luke repeats these verses word for word in 18, 18-19, but Matthew makes additions. To Matthew there seems to be a lack of motivation in Jesus' answer to the young man's question. Keeping faithfully to the 'original text' he tried to clarify the incident, and to give a more illuminating meaning to Jesus' response which in Mark's version seems uncalled for.

<sup>1</sup> Compare with Tobit, Judith, Susanna, or Greek history.

Matthew 19, 16 reads:

'Good master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?'

Instead of Mark's 'What shall I do', Matthew has the young man ask 'What good thing shall I do,' and by this addition Matthew indicates that for him the whole point of the story lies in the meaning understood for that one word 'good'.

Now many a reader may have been puzzled by Jesus' answer in Mark. Here it is well to remember that during the period of verbal transmission much of the original meaning behind Jesus' words would naturally tend to become obscure even though tradition faithfully preserved the words themselves. At times it would seem that the evangelists themselves were baffled and simply wrote down the words of their source without any attempt at comment. But in this passage Matthew takes variance with Mark and gives us his own conception. The young man uses the word 'good' twice, and each time in that pagan sense so well understood in those days, the sense which carries with it overtones of 'holy', of 'sanctified', of *profit for the worshipper*; the young man assumes that he can win life eternal by doing a 'good thing', that is, by an appropriate sacramental act, by an offering or by some other *prescribed* course of activity.

To many Jesus' reply to the young man's polite address has seemed hard and unwarranted. Nevertheless Jesus' 'God alone is good' strikes at the heart of the young man's secret hope, his pagan presumption that Jesus is 'good', that is, the master-magician who can specify the procedure by which eternal life is to be had. 'God alone can give it', Jesus says in effect. 'It cannot be bought — neither by parting with some precious thing, nor by any other partial renunciation. But give up everything, give up your wish to be rich, your whole earthly self; change completely. Then you will BE what you now erroneously suppose you can GET.'

This example from Matthew is only one of many that might be cited to show that he was doing more than chronicle events or combine a number of independent texts. And yet, it has been said again and again that all he or any of the other evangelists accomplished was the compilation of such oral and written material as had come to be regarded as authentic. Again, this must be denied, for if this were so, he would surely have laid greater emphasis on accuracy, and in the event accuracy turns out to be the least of his preoccupations. If this were merely a compilation of the pre-existing sources would he have perpetrated such obvious mistakes?

At the least would he not have checked the scriptures before quoting them?

Matthew 12, 3-4 reads:

'But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?'

Actually David did not enter God's house, but the house of the priests where the shewbread was baked. If Matthew had cared about accuracy he could have corrected this easily (I Samuel 21).

Another slip which could have been avoided appears in Matthew 23, 35: when Jesus uses the words

'... from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.'

But Zacharias was not Barachias' son; he was the son of Jehoiada (II Chronicles 24, 20). The commentaries explain this lapse by referring to it as a gloss of A.D. 69 or later, but no convincing evidence as to why this should so conveniently turn out to be a gloss has ever been presented.

Similar mistakes are to be found in Luke. In fact, Luke more than any evangelist seems unconcerned with achieving unity in his gospel. In the first part of his second chapter Mary is told everything concerning the divine nature of her infant son, but in verses 48-50 of that same chapter she is unaware of these revelations and speaks to Jesus as she would speak to any ordinary child. The factual improbability of the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem is too well known to merit retelling and many other inconsistencies left unreconciled indicate that the author considered these matters of negligible importance.<sup>1</sup>

For anyone who regards the synoptics as eye-witness accounts the story of Gethsemane should give rise to still greater difficulties. The agony takes place while the disciples sleep, and there is no point in asking how Matthew came to know so precisely what

<sup>1</sup> In the story of the ten lepers for instance, Luke 17, 12-19, we are told that Jesus healed the sick men instantaneously and then admonished them to 'show themselves unto the priests' which was the regular custom for one who wished to be declared clean. But one of the lepers is a Samaritan. Has this non-Jew to show himself to the priests according to Jewish customs? Luke neglects to say. — The story includes other confusing elements which still continue to puzzle its readers. An example is the last verse, 19, which is further discussed on footnote, p. 149.

happened to Jesus during that time. Since we can hardly presume that Jesus would have found occasion or would have wished to tell the details of this hour or of the cup he must drink, we can be sure that here again Matthew and the others overstep the literal truth.

One might argue, and it actually is argued, that the account of Gethsemane can be explained as an instance of divine revelation to the evangelists. Not so the sequence of contradictions, inaccuracies and improbabilities associated with Jesus' trial.

What are we to think of a story that has the Sanhedrin — a solemn body of seventy-one men which customarily sat in the hall of Gazith, the Hall of Hewn Stone, the great hall of justice — gathering in the small hours of the night in a private house, to hear Jesus, and then having adjourned once, convening for a second time at six o'clock that same morning to send Jesus before Pilate, who incidentally is even then on the bench awaiting the accused? In turn, what would we think of Pilate's eccentric impulse in sending the prisoner to the half-Jew Herod who is also conveniently waiting for him, and who immediately returns him to the Roman? Meanwhile scribes, priests, Pharisees and Sadducees, all of them highly respectable elders of Jerusalem, run back and forth with the defendant, screaming as vociferously for his death as the rabble which form the mob before Pilate's palace.

There are other details which are even more amazing. We hear of no prosecutor; the judge himself brings the accusation. Though forty days had to elapse before a decision of the Sanhedrin became final, we are asked to believe that in this case the accused is dispatched instantly to the place of execution accompanied to Golgotha by a great crowd which has nothing more important to do on this day before Passover than to wander about playing audience.

The facts speak so strongly that no reader can help doubting the accuracy of the story in the form that has come down to us. The scholar quickly perceives still other improbabilities. The strictness of Jewish law was proverbial, then and now. In the Sanhedrin a vote for conviction became effective only after it had been confirmed by a second vote taken on the succeeding day. Let us hear some of the rules prescribed to prevent rash decisions by this body.

'A herald must go before the convicted one proclaiming his name, the charges upon which he was condemned, and crying aloud that any one who might know anything in his defence should speak out at once. The procession to the place of execution had to stop at

least twice to give opportunity for such late testimony, and if it were offered the trial must be taken up *de novo*.<sup>1</sup>

Are we to conclude that the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John knew none of these facts, or that they were too careless to inform themselves as to the usual court procedure before describing it? Were they so simple, so uninstructed? Read a page from any one of the gospels. Even if certain archaisms and inelegancies of expression may disturb the reader, he still cannot help being impressed by the quality of the composition, the force of the presentation, the skill of a narrative which brings out the dominant ideas in such a way that these alone seem to matter, and which forces the reader to conclusions which he can neither avoid nor mistake.

Any impartial reader must admit that these books were written by intelligent, gifted men, writers possessed of real literary talent, deep understanding of the human heart, and sure knowledge of the basic social problems of their time. They relate events, dialogues and parables with unmatched terseness and colour, and what is more, they present us with a rounded picture of a character who differs radically from any other figure in scripture or in literature. This picture is so vivid, so irresistibly convincing, it is drawn with such directness and poignancy, that no reader can escape the sense of actuality, the sense that he is experiencing the events himself in the role of an eye witness. Jesus is more alive for us today than many persons we have known personally, more alive than any other historical personage described for us in biography, incomparably more alive than any product of invention. Macbeth and Hamlet seem shadows by comparison. We can forget Hamlet; we cannot forget Jesus.

And there is yet another still more conclusive proof of the descriptive genius which was the evangelists' peculiar gift, a proof *ex post facto*, one which rests on the results, the effects themselves. Not one of the critical works, especially none of the many lives of Jesus which have appeared from time to time during the last century, could annihilate or even alter Jesus. To the confusion of David Strauss, of Renan, of Nietzsche and the historians of their school, to the surprise of the etymologists and exegesists who followed in their steps, Jesus continued to exist, unscathed and unassailable; and what must have disconcerted them even more was to discover that their criticism seemed somehow always to have been beside the point.

No, the evangelists were neither careless nor simple nor un-

<sup>1</sup> C. M. Cobern, *The New Archaeological Discoveries*, p. 632.



instructed. They were quite conscious of their departures from the literal truth, and once they had organized their work in a form which delivered their message and laid down the instructions it had been their purpose to convey, they apparently felt that further reworking was impossible. Some inaccuracies and contradictions were permitted to stand when discovered, either as compromises with tradition and current belief, or because they were well suited to bring home an important point. And some others—for example those concerning the passion and the trial—cannot possibly have been oversights. To explain their presence in the scripture we must recognize that the evangelists were making a supreme effort to state the truth as they knew it and in ways best fitted to accomplish their particular purpose. We should accept, then, that certain of these contradictions are literary devices.

Oscar Wilde called the gospels poems in prose, and even though this comparison may seem shocking when applied to the scriptures, it is hard to deny its aptness. Like poets, the authors of the gospels strive with all the means at their disposal to create an impression of such acuity that it could neither be mistaken nor forgotten. In that sense they were artists, and even though they cast their message in the form of biography, no mere biography, even the most faithful and detailed, could ever achieve in such fullness what the gospels achieve.

Jesus and his teachings come to us in writings which in their intensity and subjectivity are works of art. Art sacrifices factual fidelity for clarity. In art consistency and probability are subordinated to strength in the exposition. Terseness and economy of detail are part of the technique.

The painter may put a grey surface where he actually sees a wall of tiles; the tiles would disturb the expression of the face he is painting. The artist will see ten wrinkles in a face but only reproduce one, knowing that if this one wrinkle is properly placed, it will evoke the impression of all the others and still not disturb the total effect he wants to produce.

The authors of the gospels treat many of their themes in a similar manner. The court session as told in the synoptics is something like a gothic picture. There are reductions and exaggerations, simplifications and condensations, suppression of details unrelated to the leading ideas. A court session which may in reality have dragged on over several days, with much judicial ado and running to and fro, is portrayed in such a way that every reader, every listener, literate or illiterate, must know, and still knows, what really happened, what events among all those that took place really mattered. And throughout the narrative the same method



prevails. Just as the observer will see all the wrinkles the artist did not paint, so the gospel reader will know how to fill in the blanks left in the description. The details as he imagines them may not be absolutely accurate, but with the clearly indicated essentials before him he will reconstitute the whole *moral* structure as it emerges from a mass of historical, social and dialectic debris — the clay used in the building of the temple.

Thus, art often portrays reality more truly than do records and annals. A complete narrative dilutes, and often vitiates the essentials. Any writer who persists in an effort to portray the truth as he sees it is forced to eliminate certain parts of his material and to introduce fiction instead. Flaubert, in *Herodiade*, gives us the finest picture we have of the first years of our era by eliminating, combining, stressing, a picture so vivid that it brings the character of the time to our minds more correctly than any history has been able to do. Flaubert's fiction is truer than 'the truth'.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless the empty spaces, the silences, the intervals, all those facts left untold in the gospels, have always puzzled and will continue to puzzle a world avid for complete, and factual information. Many voluminous Lives of Jesus have been written to supply just these lacks. But in reconstructing much of what the gospels intentionally omit these modern writers too often prove themselves to be artists in reverse. In their efforts to improve the story, by filling in the details which our imagination can easily

<sup>1</sup> The discovery of various ancient papyri has shed some new light on the 'Trial', and it now appears that for all their improbabilities and inconsistencies the gospel accounts may contain in addition to their moral truths a certain amount of procedural information.

In A.D. 85 an Egyptian governor delivers his decision in the case of a certain Phebon in terms strikingly reminiscent of those of Pilate:

'Thou hadst been worthy of scourging ... but I will give thee to the people.'  
(Deismann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 267, quoted by Cobern)

As for the crucifixion, we know from the Talmud that it was a penalty unknown to Jewish law, and characteristically Roman. Judas of Galilee had been crucified by the Romans only 16 years before Jesus suffered, but the proceeding then had been entirely in the hands of the Romans and the Sanhedrin had taken no part whatsoever. Now Cobern tells us 'The papyri prove that the legal procedure of the Roman government in criminal cases differed in the provinces from the practice in Italy. In the provinces a preliminary hearing by the local authorities — corresponding exactly to the action of the Sanhedrin — was customary, after which the case was handed over to the prefect for formal trial. Richard W. Husband finds that the course of trial in the Roman court harmonizes with the procedure shown in the sources to be that pursued by governors of provinces in hearing criminal cases' (Cobern, loc. cit., p. 364).

supply, and by elaborating what has only been indicated, they are merely describing in many words what the evangelists adumbrated by a single stroke of the pen. With this retouching they unwittingly replace fine painting with photography, photography that too often is dull, sentimental and misleading.

They want to fill out the portrait of Jesus, to improve on the gospels, to give us an image better than the one we have, and we read: 'Jesus, a perfect man, a man of sublime heroism, facing death for his principles ...' Such language is not only ineffectual; it is worse. The real character of Jesus is debased, not only in degree but even more in kind. When he is extolled in phrases identical with those commonly used to praise one of our deserving fellow men, he ceases to be the unique being.

The gospels themselves never use adjectives to describe Jesus. They set forth the facts in such a way that the reader cannot help supplying his own adjectives.

Few people would deny the scriptures this high value as writing, yet as works of art they are still far from flawless. The reasons are not far to seek. Combining and compiling from pre-existing works is an unpromising medium for any artist, a fact that is perceptible on almost every page of the gospels. Sayings, stories, traditions, even though masterfully told in detail, suffer from having been pieced together. The seams show everywhere, and the very effort to secure continuity, to produce a readable whole from unrelated events and sayings, adds obscurity to passages which were undoubtedly obscure to begin with.

As an example many sayings of Jesus have been incorporated into most improbable dialogues out of what is apparently a sort of editorial necessity. These were probably isolated sayings, the so-called *apothegma*, which had been passed along from person to person, from teacher to teacher. In their present settings they appear too often as answers to questions which obviously are unrelated to them. Both question and 'saying' may have originated independently, and been treasured for reasons we can no longer know; but put together in the form they take in our texts, they merely obscure each other, and often turn a whole passage into a meaningless episode.

Take the case of Jesus' much debated words:

'Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath no where to lay his head.'

(Matthew 8, 20; Luke 9, 58)

The sentence can well stand alone, and probably stresses a significant

truth — that 'the man of heaven will be homeless on earth', a displaced person, as it were. But in Matthew and Luke it is given as Jesus' reply to a man who asks to be accepted as a disciple. As an answer to such a question, the saying when given in the first person seems unnecessarily self-pitying, and completely out of character with Jesus. Not once do we read of any attempt by Jesus to establish a home, or of any wish expressed to found one. The wanderer's life which may have been difficult for his followers, was certainly not difficult for him.<sup>1</sup>

Note how the construction differs from that which follows in the dialogues of Luke 9, 59-60 and 61-2 where the requests naturally evoke the responses.<sup>2</sup> Here once again Jesus' pronouncements are meant beyond all doubt as answers for just such people as the rich young man.

An even better illustration of the author's efforts to work their material together into a readable whole comes out in comparison of these patched-together sections with the sort of passage Dibelius has called 'paradigm', a dialogue which leads up to a 'saying' and brings out its sense in a striking way. The paradigm does not consist of isolated parts arbitrarily put together, but of a well-thought-out episode all of which except for the concluding 'saying' may be pure invention. Mark 12, 14 tells us how a number of ill-intentioned Pharisees approach Jesus in the temple, beginning the interview with the words:

'Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man; for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?'

— which may be paraphrased 'you, being a man who is known to tell the truth without regard for consequence ...' This introduction, beautifully conceived for preparing a setting which will bring out all the various implications of Jesus' answer, lights up every facet of the words concerning Caesar's penny, and makes the saying one of the most memorable in the Bible.

Let us assume, then, that while the evangelists may have thought

<sup>1</sup> In these instances where question and answer obviously do not belong together, amateurs as well as scholars have been presented with a vast playground for their speculations. These passages afford intervening areas of irrelevance which lend themselves to almost any interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9, 59 b: 'Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.'

Luke 9, 61-62: '... let me first go bid them farewell which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'

of themselves as chroniclers, they were not chroniclers; that though they believed themselves to be instructors, they were not exclusively instructors; that while they would never have introduced significant fictions, into their work, they nevertheless contrived to obtain the very results that artists strive for.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF THE AUTHORS ON THEIR TEXTS

In addition to the problems of composition which have been described, the authors of the gospels were subject to a host of difficulties each of which, in its own way, left its mark on the final text. Unless we take the most important of these into account, many verses are bound to be misunderstood.

1. First among these must be put a human weakness of the authors and editors themselves. They had to deal with material which often came into their hands incomplete or in such a defective form as to be almost unintelligible; some of these cryptic passages which they were neither able to explain or willing to drop, were obviously inserted without comment. For an example see the discussion of the parable of the Dishonest Steward on p. 135.

2. Next they failed to elaborate many passages — perfectly intelligible to them — which have lost their meaning with the centuries, or if not their meaning, then at least their flavour. Among these are the frequent references to events and conditions of the time, common knowledge to the writer and his contemporaries, but enigmas for us.

In Matthew 23, 27 Jesus speaks of 'whited sepulchres'. This refers to the custom of applying a coat of whitewash to tombs on the day before Passover, a step designed to preserve the faithful from the ritual uncleanness which resulted from any contact with a dead body. Luke, in 11, 44 obviously has this same custom in mind:

'Woe unto you hypocrites, for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them.'

To go outside the gospels for another instance of this sort, Hebrews 10 can never be correctly understood unless the references to Mithraic rites, so popular at the time, are recognized as such:

'It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin.'

(Hebrews 10, 4)

This has nothing to do with Jewish sacrificial practices, as is often supposed, but is a direct reference to the baptism of blood received during the Mithraic initiation, a ceremony which is also referred to in the nineteenth verse of that same chapter:

'Having boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say his flesh ... having washed our bodies with pure water.'

(Hebrews 10, 19ff)

On its face the word 'boldness' does not make sense, neither does 'the veil' nor 'the washing of the body with pure water'. But readers who were familiar with the Mithraic ceremonies would have understood at once. There the neophyte had to enter 'boldly' into the mysterious underground crypt; his eyes were 'veiled', and he was 'sprinkled with blood and washed with water'.

Obviously the author of Hebrews was not only contrasting the crudeness of Mithraic worship with the spiritual values of Christianity, but was eager to show that Christian ritual paralleled the Mithraic at all points and omitted no possible advantage to be had from the latter. A. Weigall<sup>1</sup> cites other instances in the epistles showing this same tendency. For instance 'Be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage ...' (Galatians 5, 1). The Mithra adept had to step across a channel of water, the hands being entangled in the entrails of a bird, signifying sin. He was 'liberated' on the other side.<sup>2</sup>

3. Another influence affecting the text that no attentive reader should overlook is the need the authors often felt to insert embellishments into their narrative. These are most apparent when a passage in one of the synoptics is compared with the corresponding section of another, and often it is in these little decorative touches that we see best the personal psychology of the writers.

Sometimes these bits do no more than brighten up an incident or make a scene more picturesque. Take the story of the passion which, according to the current view, made up by far the greater part of the original evangel, the *kerygma*, the 'tidings', as preached during the first centuries. Many of the details are taken directly from the twenty-second psalm.

'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint ... ; my strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth

<sup>1</sup> A. Weigall, *The Paganism in our Christianity*, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

to my jaws; they pierced my hands and my feet ... ; they part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture ...

Both Matthew and Mark make Jesus on the cross cry out with the opening words of this same psalm: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.' On the other hand Luke, who is here more conscious of Christ than of Jesus the man, omits this last in order to introduce in its stead the story of the good thief. Obviously the exclamation of despair could not stand alongside the quiet confidence shown in the latter episode.

Other details of the passion follow so closely the old Babylonian-Assyrian custom of proclaiming a man king for a day that we cannot take them as authentic in this Palestinian milieu. The purple coat, the acclamation as 'king of the Jews', the staff put into his hand and the formal exposure to public derision, all parallel what is to be found in the old Babylonian ritual regicide.<sup>1</sup>

Unhistorical though these details probably are, they nevertheless build up the scene with unmatched effectiveness and better than pure invention ever could have done, presenting as they do the physical and moral suffering of the victim in all its depth. They speak as effectively to modern man just as they did to Jesus' contemporaries and they will doubtlessly speak thus to the readers of future generations, for they bring out the essence of the tragedy in a language that knows no time. We may call them artistic devices, or in the painter's language brush strokes. They probably had no other significance for the writer, but as we shall presently see the use of these decorative touches could and often did alter or obscure the meaning of a passage.

4. There is still another type of variation between one gospel and another which goes beyond anything one could reasonably call embellishment and is undoubtedly meant to support the author's own dogmatic position. This occurs, particularly in the later material, whenever the question of Jesus' own opinion as to his messianism comes to the fore. This, of course, raised a problem which was as important for the evangelists as it is for us today. If

<sup>1</sup> The origin of the ancient custom of arraying a man in the garb of a king and investing him with the royal attributes in a mock ceremony before putting him to death is to be sought in the widespread primitive custom of ritual regicide which was practised with the purpose of renewing the royal power by replacing an old king with a younger prince. In later times the king had the right to appoint a substitute who should die in his stead. (See Sir J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, MacMillan, pp. 332ff) 'Now it was as a god or demigod that the king had to die; therefore the substitute who died for him had to be invested, at least for the occasion, with the divine attributes of the king' (Frazer, p. 337).



Jesus was speaking as the messiah, we must interpret his words and parables as articles of the new law he was establishing in the name of God and we must give them the same force the Israelites gave to the words of Moses when he laid down his law for them. Quite apart from the theological question of Jesus' divinity, which can only be decided on a basis of faith, we must face the psychological question — did Jesus himself believe that he was the Messiah — for his words and deeds will appear in one light or another depending on how that question is answered.

#### THE MASSES AND THE MESSIAH

Not long ago a story which is very illuminating for our purpose was reported from one of the little islands off the west coast of France. In the absence of a priest a fisherman had been saying mass. He had been doing this for a long, long time before word of it reached the scandalized clergy. Hailed into court, the man contended he had only performed the sacred rite under pressure. The community had forced him 'to be what they insisted I was', that is, a sacred man. Having no priest and needing one, they had made him priest, and there had been no escaping this role they had forced upon him.

Renan's theory of Jesus' career has much in common with this story. According to him Jesus at the beginning had been considered a divinely inspired, an in-all-ways extraordinary man, but only a man; and most particularly he was only a man in his own eyes. Then, gradually, his character began to be built up, not through his own efforts, not through those of his disciples, but as a consequence of an irresistible wave of popular exaggeration which originated partly in the overwhelming impression he made on the masses and partly in the wishes of these masses to see the Messiah in the flesh.

Recent archaeological finds bearing on this point confirm Renan in much of this and permit us to see that something resembling a mythical rearrangement of the facts was already taking place within Jesus' lifetime, that this was the way the hope of the masses first reacted to his teaching and especially to his appearance.

The new evidence, consisting in the main of notations on ostraca and on the backs of discarded commercial papyri, has been discovered at a variety of sites in the Near East. The notes are 'sayings' of Jesus to be used in teaching or as private memoranda. The chief value of these finds is that they furnish us a link between the canonical and apocryphal gospels and at the same



time throw a vivid light on the currents moving about in the Christianity of these early times. They show for instance that the Christological material which is usually associated with the period in which John's gospel was conceived (A.D. 100-125) may have been widely accepted almost from the beginning.<sup>1</sup> Apocryphal works couched in a phraseology very similar to that used by John already constituted a literature which abounded in miraculous stories.

According to Petrie these 'sayings', grouped together in so-called 'blocks', may have begun to circulate in small quantities during Jesus' lifetime, even as memorabilia of Socrates were handed about in the Athens of Socrates' day.

These sources, like most other apocrypha, are loath to admit the humanity of Jesus, or that Jesus could have suffered pain, thus documenting what we have already mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. The Docetists, a heretical sect of later years, following in this trend, held that Christ had only 'seemed' to be human, having neither actually suffered, nor died — a theory which could not be tolerated by the church for reasons already advanced in this chapter. It was the same with the apocryphal gospels of Barnabas and Peter which suppress virtually every incident which shows Jesus in human guise.

In the light of what we learn from these extremely early records, we may presume, on solid grounds, that it was not Jesus, but Jesus' followers who first proclaimed his divinity. Even in the canonical accounts of Jesus we find traces of this — the exclamations of demoniacs and others, hailing him as God's elect, son of David, the holy One, epithets that Jesus promptly rejected and rebuked. We have already mentioned, however, that by apostolic times proofs of his divinity had become almost a psychological necessity for the success of the new religion. Soon this necessity gave birth to a new flood of spurious details as to his birth and boyhood, his 'virtues' in the old pagan sense, the magical powers of his body, all portraying him as a superhuman being even at his mother's knee. Most of these so-called facts were carefully excluded from the canon.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the Oxyrynchus Papyri; material in the Dead Sea Scrolls points also in this direction.

<sup>2</sup> Note the sense the word 'virtue' is used in Mark 5, 30.

<sup>3</sup> The oldest of the known apocrypha, the so-called Gospel of Peter, which once held a place of honour comparable to that of the four canonical gospels, is full of repulsive absurdity. We read that Christ emerged from the tomb so tall that his head reached above 'the heavens' (verse 10), that the Pharisees asked for soldiers to guard the tomb lest 'the people suppose that he is risen from the dead', but in this respect it is still not up to the measure of the

As we have said the synoptics themselves were not entirely immune to these pressures from a miracle-hungry body of worshippers. But here it is worth adding that popular imagination was not the only cause of certain tendentious manipulations that can be traced in the original text.

To convince the masses of the virtue of the new religion authority was needed (see pp. 39, 84). A mere assertion that Jesus had been divinely inspired was not enough: the missionary leaders felt that an even more positive assurance must be had. The proselyte needed this assurance in the most authoritative terms before he could abandon his time-honoured tradition, before he could cease to be what he had always considered to be 'good'. For such men permission was not enough; they must be *ordered* to turn their backs on the old faith and on the old ways of doing 'good', and being 'good'. Reverence for their old gods must be identified henceforth with the service of Satan.

This need of the masses for a divine imperative reproduced in many respects the psychological situation of Mosaic times, when only the word of God as given at Sinai could deliver the people from their fear of casting off the traditional oblations and disciplines, and implant in them the belief that what they would henceforth be doing was the better thing, the holy thing. Only another 'must' could replace the existing 'must'; only a sanction that came from a source outside, a source demonstrated to be greater than what had hitherto been accepted as great, could calm their apprehensions. Proofs of Jesus' authority, palpable, irrefutable proofs, were demanded, proofs which would annihilate the authority of the cults they were being asked to abjure. For people such as these Jesus had to be more than a messenger from God. He must be the Anointed One, the Messiah, and in the last analysis God himself.

Now, if the founder of the new religion had actually been divine in the most literal sense, the events of his life should give evidence of that divinity. As a result the gospels give us the miracle stories on the one hand, thus demonstrating Jesus' mastery over the satanic forces, and on the other fabulous details which substitute mankind's most perfervid dreams of grandeur for the more humble events of a merely human life. The virgin birth, the astral associa-

'Infancy Gospels'. These make the boy Jesus into a sort of magician, in the old dangerously heroic style, 'killing everyone who displeases him' (XX, 16), helping his father in the carpenter shop by stretching timber to the proper length with his bare hands, or making birds out of clay and giving them life by clapping his hands (XIX, 19)—this last a favourite miracle shown in many medieval pictures.

tions, the birth among cattle (so often associated with the hero in tradition and myth); a lineage of kings; the face to face encounter with Satan, the descent into Hades (like Ishtar, like Innini and many others); — as the young church began to take on form these biographical particulars made their appearance in the gospels which came after Mark.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately the Messianic problem could not be settled by the simple device of introducing birth legends and miracle stories; this is evident on almost every page of the synoptics. In them the question takes on such preponderant weight and is so intimately bound up with the figure of Jesus, that one must form an opinion on this point before he attempts any interpretation.

#### THE MESSIANIC SECRET

That Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah is difficult to accept in the face of his consistent reluctance to assert that fact, but those who take this position explain this reluctance on the basis of one or another of two arguments:

1. The first of these is that Jesus was disinclined to associate himself with the popular illusions as to what such a messiah should be, and his wish is understandable considering the historical facts.

The great majority of first-century Jews were still living in expectation of the establishment of a tangible, material paradise on earth, a hope which had been kept dangling before their eyes for centuries, and even Jesus' disciples were incapable of liberating themselves entirely from this conventional belief (See Luke 24, 21 and Acts 1, 6).

The messiah was expected to appear in shining armour and mounted on a white steed, and it was actually in such guise that

<sup>1</sup> Some part of the origin of these particulars must be found in man's poetic imagination as it weaves its fondest hopes into the representation of the venerated person. Actually these supernatural aspects are mostly *negative* in character, more the blotting out of homely details than statements intended to be taken as historical truth. They serve to efface the all-too-human associations that go with an ordinary childhood spent in an ordinary household amid simple village surroundings. The vague background of mysterious birth and kingly ancestry is like the undefined, unspecific tones used by the great painters to frame the heads of their portraits, and like these it serves to tell us that the man depicted is more than what his physical attributes seem to imply, more than the sum of his biographical data.

The artist immanent in man's subconscious mind insisted on representing Jesus as one endowed with a knowledge wider than any to be obtained from ordinary sources; as one who by his origin and associations understood those eternal truths which transcend the limits of mere earthly existence. Jesus had to be thought of as one born near the very sources of life.

Bar Kokeba headed the Jewish troops in their fight for liberation in A.D. 132. Kokeba, 'Who had risen like a star in Jacob's house',<sup>1</sup> was hailed everywhere as the Messiah and universally accepted as such until his defeat in 134 when Sextus Publius Severus put an end to the story. To be a Kokeba, to do what Kokeba would attempt to do, was the messiah's traditional role. Therefore it was a terrible disappointment to many when it became clear that Jesus was promising something very different, that his kingdom was not of this earth and that he was by no means the sort of liberator who would make his appearance on a white steed — though popular imagination later insisted on portraying his entry into Jerusalem in just these terms. During the trial and the passion this disappointment was so deep that even some of the disciples turned from him, convinced for the moment that they had been deceived and were following the wrong man.

Grandmaison, who may be considered the mouthpiece of the Roman Church, takes much this view saying that, 'Jesus was not willing to incarnate in his person an idea of Messiah so false and deformed that in it the prophetic visions would be unrecognizable ...'

One should also bear in mind that a proclamation of Messiahship would in all probability have been followed by political unrest and violent repression. In the light of what befell Judas of Galilee during Jesus' own lifetime, in A.D. 16, there is little reason to doubt that this is exactly what would have happened.

Grandmaison bases his explanation of Jesus' reluctance to proclaim himself on these plausible arguments, though at the same time he believes that Jesus knew his Messianism from the first, a view which Cadman and other scholars share. Wrede goes even further when he sets out to prove that Jesus deliberately withheld the revelation of his true Messianic nature until the resurrection 'despite the efforts of the demons and the impatience of his disciples'.

So much for this argument. It is entirely understandable, but as we shall see later it is difficult to harmonize with Jesus' own words and acts.

2. The second argument is based on the attitude of Judas Iscariot during the last days in Jerusalem. His attitude is cited as a proof that any revelation of Messianism was extremely dangerous for the one claiming it. Schweitzer argues that 'the fact that Judas betrayed his master is less important than what he betrayed

<sup>1</sup> From the description of Kokeba attributed to Akiba, the great second-century Rabbi. It is a play on the word *Kokab*, a star.

about his master, that is, the Messianic secret'. The revelation of this secret would be enough in itself to determine the court's verdict, and if this is in fact the secret Judas betrayed, then Jesus must have believed it himself and have communicated it to the disciples.

This theory is certainly open to doubt, not only because of Judas' absence as a witness at the trial and the complete silence with regard to any testimony offered by him, but even more because of the general reticence of the gospels on the point. Nowhere is it settled that Judas or any of the disciples 'shared a secret', nowhere is it stated that any of them ever believed with certainty that Jesus was the Messiah until after his death and resurrection.

Scholars who have made a close study of the material, Bultmann among them, state emphatically that this was not the case, that the secret dawned upon the disciples only after these events had occurred. 'The texts in which Jesus states that he is the Messiah are secondary, unauthentic,' Bultmann writes, 'a reflection of the faith of the community and inserted in the gospels in later years.' This statement is in accord with the theory we have developed on earlier pages.

As a matter of fact, every objective reader of the synoptics (here to be distinguished sharply from John) soon gets the impression that the disciples regard Jesus as an ordinary human being and never as a god — except in 'secondary, unauthentic' verses which in many cases can be easily detected.

In Acts 10, 38 Luke writes:

'How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.'

Could Luke have written such a verse if he considered Jesus to be God? What the disciples actually believed is evident enough in lines like these:

'Increase our faith' (Luke 17, 5).

'What manner of man is this: for he commandeth even the winds and water:'

(Luke 6, 25)

'And he could there do no mighty work ...'

(Mark 6, 5)

Would Mark have spoken this if he believed that the disciples had regarded Jesus as a god? Or would the disciples have fallen asleep

three times during Jesus' agony if they had considered him their god?<sup>1</sup>

All in all, Jesus' reluctance to affirm his Messianic nature stands as an argument for his own doubt in this matter and for the doubts of the evangelists as well. No reader of the gospel can escape the impression that as a whole the treatment of Messianism in the synoptics has been left at a controversial level, a question not finally settled. In Luke 13, 33 Jesus calls himself 'a prophet' and in the next verse he repeats: 'O Jerusalem which killeth the prophets ...' There is scarcely a trace of any popular recognition of his Messianic possibilities either at the time of his entry into Jerusalem or later in the course of the passion week, even at the very end.<sup>2</sup>

Wellhausen insists that Jesus never considered himself the messiah and never held himself forth as such, that when he seems to admit his messianism before the high priests, he was giving the matter no real importance, and indeed any impartial reader will be struck by his ambiguous answer to the question of the high priest — a very unusual question certainly —

'I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether you be the Christ, the Son of God.'

and Jesus replies:

<sup>1</sup> Albert Schweitzer (*The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, Macmillan, 1950) sets out to prove that the disciples shared 'the secret', but were forbidden to divulge it because Jesus was not *as yet* the Messiah, and would only 'come to glory on the clouds' after he had suffered death. According to this author, Jesus' whole preaching was based on the expectation of an apocalyptic creation of the kingdom of God as a consequence of some cosmic cataclysm brought on through God's omnipotence; this catastrophe would be precipitated by Jesus' self-sacrifice which in turn would raise him to Messianic status. Therefore he refuses to announce his Messianism since on earth he is only his own 'forerunner'.

For all the arguments Schweitzer brings, such a distinction remains specious, since a being who is going to be god must be god already, and we can hardly imagine a prophet of Jesus' stature splitting hairs on an issue of this magnitude — saying 'no' when it is actually 'yes'. On the whole, Schweitzer's Jesus is bound to escape the average reader. A being wholly obsessed by the prospect of a world-catastrophe, thinking only in apocalyptic terms and disinterested in the world as it is, is an ecstatic, a dreamer who has nothing in common with us. Moreover, with the exception of a few prophetic verses he is not to be found in the gospels. If his preachings are only exhortation to 'penance in preparation of the coming kingdom' accompanied by threats of eternal damnation, if the world is to be considered as totally evil and irretrievably lost, how is one to harmonize his character with that of the man who spoke the words 'come unto me all ye that labour ...' 'my yoke is easy, my burden is light'.

<sup>2</sup> For a further discussion of this question see pp. 156ff.



'Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you ...'

(Matthew 26, 63-4)

This is as ambiguous as the answer he gives a little later to Pilate when the procurator asks if he is the king of the Jews. Here the response is:

'Thou sayest.'

(Matthew 27, 11)

Luke is still more evasive. The high priest asks:

'Art thou then the Son of God? And he said unto them, Ye say that I am.'<sup>1</sup>

Would the disciples have questioned the anointing of Jesus with costly oil if they considered him to be the Messiah? Would Judas have protested so crudely? We may safely conclude that even if Schweitzer's assumption were true, even if in the course of his treason Judas did make some statement about the Messianic claim, he would have done so only because he wanted to incriminate his master in a way that was certain to ruin him, and for this purpose it would be unimportant whether the charge were true or false.

As long as the problem of Judas has come under consideration it would be well to point out that here the proponents of Jesus' divinity come up against their greatest obstacles. The unfortunate choice of Judas as a disciple cannot be logically explained if Jesus is omniscient.<sup>2</sup> The argument that Jesus chose him knowingly to the end that the prophecies might be fulfilled 'and to seal his own doom' is one which begs the question, and will never convince the thinking person. But worse still, such an assumption devalues one of the most meaningful, one of the most poignant facts of Jesus' life — that he is betrayed by one whom he himself has chosen, one whom he had sought to teach, to elevate, to save spiritually, one whom he loved and in whom he had confided, a member of that little group which included the only friends he ever had and the men who were to be the custodians of his message.

Furthermore, the assumption that Jesus always was aware of Judas' nature, depreciates Jesus, for if Jesus really was the character we believe him to have been, his attitude towards Judas

<sup>1</sup> What reason could there have been for him to answer so evasively at this ultimate moment? The dangers of the revelation, so highly stressed by Grand-maison, certainly existed no longer. And if the evangelists were without doubt concerning Jesus' own opinion, would they have preserved this highly controversial formula in their writings?

<sup>2</sup> Judas is sent out along with the other disciples on the mission to convert Galilee — which would hardly have happened if Jesus had been suspicious of him.



would have been different from the start. The man who had 'come to seek and to save that which was lost' (Luke 19, 10) would have concentrated more attention upon this weak member of the group and verses bearing on his endeavour would have been preserved for us throughout the gospels. But Judas is never mentioned till the end, and then he enters into the picture in a way as unexpected for us as it seems to have been for Jesus. For to Jesus the treason comes as a bitter surprise. Had he been expecting it, could he have met Judas' kiss with: 'Friend, wherefore art thou come?' (Matthew 26, 50). Is there not disappointment, grief in those wonderful words?

The Messianic theory meets even greater difficulties when Judas is considered from the human point of view. Had he known 'the Messianic secret', had he been convinced of it, he would never have done what he did. No man will betray the god in whom he believes.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the only possibility of combining Schweitzer's opinion with the psychological probabilities of the situation is to suppose that Judas *suddenly* realized that Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah, a thing that Judas himself had never considered as a possibility. Such an opinion might easily strike a good Jew as at once sacrilegious and politically dangerous, and it may have been as a good patriot that he decided to denounce Jesus. In that case the discovery after the resurrection that his master actually had been the Messiah would have made it impossible for Judas to go on living; he would actually have betrayed his god — and his end becomes psychologically logical. Thus Schweitzer's theory of the betrayal of the Messianic secret can only be accepted if it is assumed that the secret had never been shared.

Theories concerning Judas' character and motives, infinitely varied but inconclusive because of the lack of material, have been formulated again and again. From all these theories only one certainty emerges, however; no matter how one regards it, the episode of the betrayal will not stretch enough to allow for the Messianic thesis and at the same time remain understandable. It stands or falls on the human nature of Jesus. The drama and beauty of the story is annihilated if we are to suppose that Jesus knew everything about Judas from the start. It would be as if

<sup>1</sup> Luke, conscious of the unsatisfactory state of his narrative, solves his problem in 22, 3, by saying 'Then entered Satan into Judas', which is tantamount to saying that Judas acted in an inconsistent and irrational fashion.

The same objection can be advanced in the case of Caiaphas' attack on Jesus as told in John 11, 48ff. If Caiaphas *believed* in Lazarus' resurrection, and to all appearances he did, he would never have acted as he proceeded to act — he would never have taken up arms against God's son.

Oedipus had known all the time that the woman he had married was his mother.

Again and again in this and other episodes one feels that the Messianism has been grafted on the original story; that it remains there, a foreign element which mars the authentic picture. Events that are profoundly human and deeply moving ring false if we believe in the prescience of the hero.<sup>1</sup>

As for Jesus' own position, the thought that he was the Messiah may have come to him with the force of a revelation, just as similar feelings of revelation come to the man of genius who suddenly realizes that he is right in his views against the opinion of all the world. In the isolation of one who holds such unshared views, a man might well feel that his correct judgment could only be due to divine inspiration, that divinity was in fact speaking through him — in the same way that Hebrew kings felt that God spoke through their mouths. When in Mark 14, 62 Jesus admits before Caiaphas that he is the son of 'the Blessed', which is exactly as if he had said he was the son of God, the admission comes after a long sustained silence, as if it were wrested from him. In this, the sole instance when he speaks out — and provided the episode is authentic — we feel that he is not speaking boastfully. He, personally was not great; it was God speaking through him who was great. His sober 'I am', if separated from the rest of the verse which is conspicuously moulded to fit the Marcan Christology, seems to echo that other denial of his power and merit: 'Why do you call me good? God alone is good' (see p. 90-1). Jesus has already warned against adoration of his person as a dangerous self-delusion and many passages could be cited to support this view, one of them being Matthew 7, 21:

<sup>1</sup> Considered objectively, Judas' behaviour is historically interesting. It sheds light on the human aspects of the disciples' problem. Like any one of the other disciples, he may have felt disappointed, misled even, by Jesus' failure to liberate the nation, and while sooner or later the others turned away from their master, Judas, by virtue of the peculiar make-up of his character, may have resented the disappointment more acutely and felt compelled to take his revenge.

Whatever Judas' psychology, Jesus' tragedy would be incomplete without his presence. Actually Judas is as inseparable from Jesus as shadow from light. Jesus cannot be rid of him any more than he can be rid of injustice, misunderstanding, mankind and the world. From that angle Judas' behaviour — once we reconcile ourselves to the improbable way he went about his design — impresses us as true to life. He sells his master, in a mocking gesture turning the teacher's teaching against him. The coins and the kiss are master-strokes — all that is needed to give the reader the essence of what was probably a complicated situation.

'Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven ...'

But for the sake of emphasis, let it be repeated that the strongest point against the thesis that Jesus was divine, and knew himself to be such, is the fact that if the latter is so, then by far the greater part of the meaning of the gospels — the best and deepest part — is swept completely away. Either Jesus was a man, a man like ourselves, one having no certainty that he was superhuman or god-like, much less than he was god himself, in other words a man who suffered as we suffer, who went to death with no more certainty about the hereafter than we have, no more certainty about resurrection than we have, in short, a man who knew death as we know it, and suffered death as we do; or, Jesus knew from the first that he was divine. In that case the trial was a farce, his suffering, his humiliation a make-believe; his behaviour was never great in our sense of the word. Either Jesus suffered as we suffer and his career, superhuman only in its humanity, is comparable to our own, or his ordeals are unreal and shadowy.

With all this in mind we should now ask ourselves again, how could it happen that an ambiguity so repugnant to the intelligence should have been permitted to stand in work of such quality?

As to one aspect of this question we have already given an explanation. We saw that the evangelists were faced with the problem of dealing with pressure from the congregations and missionaries alike. The first sought for divinity, the others for authority, and both were limited by the facts of the historical figure. These pressures alone might have been determining, but actually they were still not all. Added to them was another, a purely human problem, a problem familiar to all religious teachers. This was the need to present the material in such a way that it would offer satisfaction to all, to every character and every nature however different, and what is even more, to all the various and varying moods which may exist within one human heart.

How did the evangelists approach this part of their problem?

We have seen that the disciples came to regard the living Jesus as in some degree superhuman; they may even have thought of him as in some measure divine, but it is highly improbable that they ever thought of him as God.<sup>1</sup> Their attitude, taking it as a

<sup>1</sup> This is the generally accepted view of biblical scholarship which has treated the subject exhaustively in a great number of well-documented works. Wrede (*Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*), Bultmann, Mundle (*Die Geschichtlichkeit des messianischen Bewusstseins Jesu*, 1922), Cadman (*The Last Journey of Jesus*, 1923), Guignebert (*The Jewish World in the Time of Jesus*) and many others.

whole, shows clearly that Jesus could not have been God in their eyes. We have already cited some of their words and acts, and we could add many more — that they never hesitated to ask questions which would have been absurd, irreverent and unseemly if addressed to a god; and last but not least that they fled when the world turned against him (Mark 14, 56; Matthew 26, 56).

In fact, it was only by slow degrees that the disciples adopted Jesus' theory of life and came to accept him as a real prophet. Then bit by bit daily contact with him loosened the hold of old traditions; custom and old ways of thinking unravelled away fibre by fibre, and gradually the sensation that God stood behind Jesus, that in following him they were serving God, serving God more truly, more fully than by doing the 'good' in the ancient ways, increased until at last it became a conviction. God was speaking through Jesus, and bit by bit Jesus himself took on stature until at the end they could say, 'Verily he is God's son'.

It was no easy task which faced the evangelists when they set out to describe this process in such a way that it would repeat itself in the reader. A consciousness of such an evolution, deep, inner, lifelong, can hardly be communicated to others by the mere process of narration. If people willed to believe — and we have noted how strong the tendency was to believe him — the prophet would grow almost immediately to a stature greater than that of any other prophets. Even before the apostles could formulate the thesis that Jesus was the Messiah, their congregations probably decided the point for them. Thus, Matthew and Luke were following rather than leading, restating a dogma rather than originating it. Under such circumstances it would have been easy to show the disciples as recognizing Jesus' divinity from the first, and the failure of the authors to do this speaks volumes. At the very least, they might have clearly stated Jesus' own opinion on the matter, but we have seen the synoptics never quite venture to do this. In spite of the alterations, the rearrangements and interpolations of later date, one can still detect how tentative they remain on this point. What facts they do bring forth to prove that Jesus knew himself to be the Messiah are weak, unconvincing and extremely controversial.

Therefore, it is probable that when the author of John came to write the fourth gospel he was conscious of this weakness in his predecessors and felt the need for a stronger affirmation. Under the pressure of new converts and of a church which was in the process of formulating its doctrines he set himself to the task of assembling a formidable battery of 'facts' which would settle the point once and for all. In doing this he perhaps went a little

farther than was desirable, for he makes Jesus, speaking in the first person, affirm his unity with God in terms so extreme that the critical reader's suspicions are promptly aroused.

This emphasis on Messianism and on the divine nature of Jesus<sup>1</sup> determines the general tone of John's gospel. Unlike the Jesus of the synoptics, Jesus here speaks in an assuming, even arrogant way, a way so unnatural in the sane human that some psychologists who have taken the gospel of John too literally have been inclined, and perhaps with some right, to characterize Jesus' manner as paranoid. These men should have realized that John is now generally taken to be a statement of the mystical dogma of the new church — conceived in accordance with Paul's theory of the Christ. It works a serious distortion upon the character of Jesus, and can hardly be considered as an account of his actual life and sayings. John refuses to treat Jesus as a human being, and thus avoids the problem which faced the authors of the synoptics.

In contrast with John, the synoptics tend to emphasize the humanity of Jesus and to play down the supernatural attributes wherever this is possible. The fundamental contradiction is still permitted to stand, and, to repeat, one important reason for this indecisive attitude has its origin in the peculiar constitution of the human heart. It may be worth while to pause here and consider what we mean by this use of the word peculiar.

#### THEORETICAL BELIEF AND BELIEF IN PRACTICE

The human heart, as a matter of fact, is not by any means a thinking machine, an instrument which adjusts its beliefs to fit the requirements of logic and consistency. This comes out clearly when we consider how we, as individuals, conceive the world, and what we conceive our own roles in that world to be.

The first thing that strikes us when we ask 'What do I mean — the world?' is that it is not a question of one world existing in the mind but of two. The first is related to our place in society, a moral world, governed by moral considerations and, for believers, by a God 'who marks each sparrow's fall', a God who hears every prayer, takes note of every transgression and concerns himself directly with the most minute thoughts and activities of the individual. Side by side with this moral world we all accept the existence of another world, the physical, but in this second world moral considerations are not determining. It is a world which

<sup>1</sup> While Matthew traces his descent from Abraham, and Luke from Adam and ultimately from God, John carries his existence back into eternity.

moves according to the laws of science and logic. God may exist in it, but only as a first cause, a unifying principle; God is not concerned with thee or me.

The important point to be noted here is that in the first of these coexisting worlds we are responsible for our acts, while in world number two we are not.<sup>1</sup> The reconciliation of these two worlds has been the object of an enormous expenditure of effort with philosophy trying but never quite succeeding to clear this hurdle, and the church devoting its best endeavour to present an acceptable solution.<sup>2</sup> But the surprising fact experience teaches us is that this effort is unnecessary for the majority of believers: the attempts to achieve this unity by means of science or theology is a work of the intellect, not a work of the heart, and the heart is what counts here. One minute we see ourselves as free souls locked in battle with the tempter; a moment later we are accepting the fact that we are merely links in a chain of causation, pre-determined by natural law and independent even of God Almighty. These contrasting viewpoints coexist in all of us. We can believe that God is omnipotent, capable of changing the face of the earth if he so wishes, and at the same time think of God as limited by laws he himself has established.

Contradictions are never insuperable obstacles to faith. Man is used to living with contradictions and for the most part they do not bother him. It is hackneyed to say that the human soul is made up of contradictions, but it is actually a saying with more truth in it than we generally care to admit. Few of our acts, few of our thoughts, projects or plans are logically co-ordinated or in agreement with each other. We know quite well that life is limited in time, and still we act as if we were sure to outlive all our contemporaries. The knowledge collected by the brain influences the knowledge of the heart only slowly, a fact which in children is particularly noticeable. Children know of the existence of death but at the same time ignore it; in their hearts they believe death to be a thing that concerns others — not themselves, and when death strikes in the family it comes as a terrible revelation. Atheists will fight Church, faith and religion all their lives and then come to their ends with the Bible in their hands. Even 'God-thinkers'

<sup>1</sup> In this physical world man's character is unchangeable; his acts are the result of influences working on this unchangeable entity. For philosophy since Schopenhauer our will is not free: what we consider to be our free will is only the inner perception of our own reactions.

<sup>2</sup> St Thomas Aquinas did succeed in effecting such a reconciliation for the medieval church, but the reconciliation broke down as soon as the scientists of the seventeenth century demonstrated his faulty concept of the physical world.



like Spinoza are hardly free from inner contradiction, from one angle accepting the law of determinism in all its rigour and from the other angle counting on man's endless ethical possibilities as if his will were free. The man who is consistent in every thought and action, the man who like Socrates remains consistent even when facing the ultimate trial of death, not only wins our admiration but is looked upon with awe because we recognize this consistency of his as something almost superhuman.

On the whole, man hardly ever acts as his convictions would have him act. Observe a man preparing for an important action, and notice how rarely his pre-existing theories and beliefs enter into consideration. Forces, completely unapprehended by him, set to work, while convenient theories and beliefs supporting the act have a way of springing up almost simultaneously with the act itself, even though they may defy both experience and former conviction. Actually they become its psychic component, justifying it in the actor's mind and insulating it from those adverse impulses which might endanger its success by diverting the actor's available energy.<sup>1</sup> Once the act in question is completed and a different situation presents itself, this new situation with its new needs will impose beliefs and theories which may be diametrically opposed to those held on the prior occasion. These in turn *protect* the new line of conduct from impulses which have their origin in unrelated ideas.

One may find examples of this on every hand. When the country is at war, objective judgments detrimental to the war effort are banned; they are even called vile, sinful; everybody concerned with the outcome of the war will passionately support this judgment. Then at the moment the war is terminated, independent judgment again becomes useful; the need for objectivity prevails, with the result that extreme nationalism is decried. The individual behaves in much this same fashion, deprecating one day what he acclaims the next. The real man of action is necessarily short sighted, for decisive action requires that one's field of vision be restricted. Great heroes are mostly bad reasoners, and good reasoners are seldom heroes. Firmness does not go with intellectual objectivity. The hypothetical man who could bring all his beliefs and views into harmony would be very poorly equipped for the struggle of life; as Lichtenberger puts it,

'He is so intelligent that he is capable of nothing.'

But going a little further into the part that one's convictions

<sup>1</sup> See M. I. Boas, *La Defense Psychique*, Paris, 1925.



play in practical life — anyone who wants to bring a course of action to a good end must be more or less 'intoxicated' during the progress of the act; he must be blind, deaf and insensible to all considerations adverse to it. During its course he remains in a state of intellectual limitation, of restricted judgment, of impaired vision. The analysis of a man's state of mind while he is engaged in action shows that this is literally true. A certain measure of amnesia is combined with a definite distortion of the facts; the mind is myopic for contra-indications, for moral implications if other people are going to be hurt, for dangers if risks are involved. It exaggerates the chances of success, ignoring factors it would otherwise consider and counting on help it would know at any other moment to be impossible. Who would gamble if he carefully weighed the chances of loss; who would be a criminal if he evaluated correctly the chances of being caught? The mind of the acting person builds up a psychic system which is like a set of walls around the course of action, protecting it until it is completed. Temporary abstraction and delusion are indispensable for the proper result.

*'Un personnage ne doit voir que ce qu'il est nécessaire et suffisant qu'il voit pour l'action — et c'est bien ce que la plupart des hommes voient.'*<sup>1</sup>

Paul Valéry

and

*'L'homme moyen est abstrait, c-à-d qu'il se réduit à sa préoccupation du moment. Il ne perçoit que ce qui se rattache à elle.'*<sup>2</sup>

Paul Valéry

The man who has just succeeded in some great accomplishment knows that he has passed through a period of temporary limitation which he may be inclined to call 'abnormality'. The criminal who claims that he was 'deranged' during the act is certainly telling the truth; he would never have been able to consummate his crime had he not been in a transitory state of distorted judgment, a judgment which he may later reject or be unable to account for.

And in more ordinary fields we know that a 'professional deformation' is a natural concomitant of professional work and even a necessity for efficient performance. We know that a man's judgment is biased by his interests and his ambitions. We know

<sup>1</sup> A person must only see what is necessary and sufficient for his act — and that is all that most people actually ever see.

<sup>2</sup> The average man is abstract: his being boils down to his preoccupation of the moment. He sees only those things which are associated with it.

how his judgment changes with every new attitude. In fact, judgment is so intimately related to action, and so dependent on action, that it is questionable whether objective judgment, particularly objective judgment with respect to theological questions, can be said to exist at all.

What is important for our problem is that a man's judgments, and hence his beliefs, are so much a part of his momentary attitude — of his activity and the wishes, hopes and fears that lie behind this activity — that all-round consistency in his judgments is impossible, as impossible as an unchangeable environment would be, or as consistent moods, consistent purposes and consistent behaviour.

A man's beliefs are unstable. They vary according to the situation in which he finds himself, or to the needs of the moment, and so coming back to the inconsistency so prevalent in the synoptics, we may say that the ambiguity concerning Jesus is in no small part an acknowledgment of this instability of the human heart, the wish to find one thing in Jesus today and something else tomorrow.

In a time of desperate stress the Christian might see the crucified Jesus as a god of purely pagan stamp, the Great Magician, who could have come down from the cross at any moment had he so wished, the mystic Paschal Lamb with bones unbroken whose resurrection had already been planned in the dark of time.

In another period of his life the same Christian might think of Jesus as a fellow human, who had gone to his death fully comprehending the fate that awaited him, and who had known the same terror and despair any ordinary human would have felt on realizing that his career was at an end. In Jesus' tragedy he recognizes his own tragedy in its most agonizing details. He remembers how Jesus suffered and how he took that suffering upon himself, and in this knowledge he is comforted. From Jesus' ordeal he draws courage to face his own.

This being so, it would seem that any attempt to combine these two concepts, in the way the Church Fathers would have us combine them, in a person who is all powerful and yet limited at the same time, is an effort unprofitable for the thinking part of humanity, and unnecessary for the rest.

The 'mystery' which makes Jesus god and man at one and the same time will always ring false to the ear, and it may be said with justice that the theologian's efforts to reconcile the irreconcilable have done more harm to the cause of Christianity than all the 'proofs' of atheists who would deny the historicity of Jesus *in toto*.

With respect to a man's beliefs theological theories are unimportant. Theory and actual belief are different and often incompatible things. Those who have made a study of the psychological aspects of religion are almost unanimous in stating that faith is independent of the intellect. As Delacroix puts it: 'The first impulse towards faith can precede any concrete meta-physical image or belief ...'<sup>1</sup>

Most men's beliefs — when put in words — prove to be extremely simple; furthermore, most men's beliefs are certainly untheological, and paradoxically enough this is as true of the erudite individual as it is of the peasant, or even of the saint.<sup>2</sup> History tells us how many a religious man in the face of all the theological arguments he has used to convince others, suddenly finds himself doubting the very existence of the god to whom he has devoted his life. Faith as well as doubt proves to have sprung from quite other regions than those he suspected. On the other hand, the unbeliever who has been accustomed to flaunt his agnosticism, may find at some turn of the road that he is overtaken by a sudden awareness of God and of a higher justice; in one single moment of sudden vision all the seemingly impregnable arguments of his brain are shattered.

The mathematician Henri Poincaré gives this striking example of how simple actual belief may be as compared to the theory elaborated in the conscious mind. 'You give a very subtle definition of a number; yet, no sooner is this definition formulated than you forget all about it; for, as a matter of fact, this definition is not at all the thing that has taught you what a number is; you have known that all along, and when subsequently you write the number down, you are giving it exactly the same meaning that it has for your janitor who has never pondered the question.'

In the same way, theologians may tell us what God really is; they may prove God's existence by various subtle demonstrations. These proofs may be reassuring and the definitions enlightening, but they do not change our views. Already, long before, most of us have evolved our own idea of God, an undefined yet vivid concept of a being who commands all those things which lie outside the scope of our own powers.

Note that we say an undefined concept. To the average man God is not a describable entity, but rather a projection of his own feelings of purpose, devotion and dependency. He does good

<sup>1</sup> Henri Delacroix, *La Religion et La Foi*, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> The saints are visited by dreams for which they cannot be held responsible (Neumann quoted by Delacroix, *ibid.*, p. 186).

because in doing so he feels he is serving The Good and being on the side of The Good. He fears the Lord, and yet looks up to him as a loving father who is filled with concern for his children and in his bounty offers them the possibility of everlasting life. In spite of what they may profess, very few individuals are without this minimum of religious faith, and undoubtedly every mortal being believes in some sort of immortality. A man may speak or think as he will, he may deny God and refuse to conceive of spirit as existing without matter, or of any life outside the life visible on this earth; nevertheless so long as he thinks and acts as a moral being, he will still believe — believe in what to his conscious mind is the Unbelievable.

Deussen<sup>1</sup> puts this idea very well when he says:

'Even though moral behaviour does not in itself depend on the belief in immortality, it needs this belief as its interpretation' (p. 179) and better yet:

'Unselfish behaviour would be completely illogical and incomprehensible without the sense of our eternal existence ...'

... 'or at least of something that transcends our earthly existence', we would add. A five-year-old expressed this same thought in a very simple and plastic way when it asked its mother, 'Why should we live, if we must die?', a very logical question which implies its reverse, 'I am unwilling to live unless life is eternal'. At the moment we say 'yes' to life, we have answered the question in our hearts.

In view of these changeable, flexible beliefs of the human heart, it is in no way amazing that they should show themselves in the contradictory features of Jesus as depicted by early Christianity. The average Christian needs to be able to think of Jesus in both his human and divine aspects.<sup>2</sup> It is far easier for him to accept the inherent contradiction, to accept the whole thing 'as a mystery' that defies explanation, than to forgo his belief in the Saviour, in Christ who was also Jesus of Nazareth. The evangelists understood this, and for that one final reason they pronounced no conclusive judgment as to Jesus' divinity.

#### FORCES OF PRACTICAL NECESSITY WORKING ON THE TEXTS

Attempts to make the Christian ideas more acceptable in the light of current custom were bound, of course, to result in further

<sup>1</sup> Paul Deussen, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie*.

<sup>2</sup> *La foi veut tout, ne rien laisser perdre. Il lui faut Jesus homme et Jesus Dieu* (Delacroix, loc. cit., p. 150).

mutilation of the original texts before they could be stabilized in their final form. The same process of social adjustment which had done its work on the Mosaic texts again operated on the Christian, and here it took a more extreme form giving rise to many additions, certain distortions, and in some cases out-and-out alterations.

Luke, for instance, tells us that Jesus 'prayed' before his baptism. Now we know that in the early baptismal service a certain prayer was repeated at one point in the ceremony. That this portion of the ritual may have suffered from the lack of some divine authority is suggested by a comparison of Luke with the earlier Mark (1, 10) in his description of Jesus' baptism. Mark knows nothing of a prayer while Luke 3, 21 reads:

'... Jesus also being baptized, *and praying*, the heaven was opened.'

By referring to Jesus' prayer the use of prayer in the service received the sanction of Jesus himself.

Another instructive instance of yielding to social forces is to be found in Luke's twelfth chapter. History tells us that the young church, which found most of its original followers among slaves and outcasts, rapidly expanded. With its invasion of the upper layers of society, the question arose whether the rich and the powerful were to be excluded from this new 'religion of the poor', a religion that scorned respectability and smiled on the harlots and sinners. Were worthy men to be denied a seat in the church and its councils, and—in heaven? For a time it must have appeared that Christianity was actually turning out to be the anti-social force the Roman authorities feared, and a rush of repair work was undertaken on the gospels in order to give assurance to the ruling power and to those new converts who were unfortunate enough to be wealthy. The most difficult of the pertinent verses was, and still is:

'... How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!'

(Mark 10, 23)

Luke repeats this idea in his eighteenth chapter and even enlarges upon it:

'For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.'

Then some part of this final rejection of all men of wealth is taken back, first in Mark where immediately after the verse cited above a new verse is inserted addressed to the disciples:

'Children, how hard is it for them that *trust in riches* to enter into the kingdom of God.'

(Mark 10, 24)

This verse conspicuously limits the sense in which the possession of 'riches' condemns a man, and only three verses later (Mark 10, 27) the idea that any group, rich or poor, is to be rejected is denied by implication:

'... with men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.'

In other words — difficulties exist for all, greater perhaps for the rich than for the poor, but God can save the one as well as the other.

Luke, on his part, appeases the more prosperous in the congregation by toning down somewhat the condemnation of material wealth as such, and emphasizing the greater worth of spiritual values.

'... seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you.'

(Luke 12, 31)

'These things' stand for 'the thing you need' as the lines preceding this verse say. Thus it is implied that all one's needs will be satisfied by God, but the question — where do one's needs end and one's wishes begin? — is left unanswered. That this amazing promise is not to be taken literally, that it is not a promise of riches for the believer, but is intended as a denial of the importance of either wealth or poverty as such, is better evident from the general tone of Luke's whole gospel than from this verse standing alone.

In view of these rather obvious editorial changes, it is surprising that the passages concerning the evils of wealth still stand in a form which expresses such strong condemnation. This emphasis on the question of money and wealth seems so much at variance with the spiritual tendencies of the gospel that the great mass of readers is puzzled. One cause of this inconsistency may be found in the extremely terse style which results from oral transmission. Jesus undoubtedly addressed himself to his followers at length and in detail, but transmission by word of mouth preserves only the most conspicuous, the most striking parts of any body of teaching. In this particular case the spirit in which the verses were intended has become obscure.

Experience proves that a poor man can be quite as avid for



money as the rich man who already possesses it, that the rich man can be as poor relative to his needs as the poor man can be rich in proportion to his particularly after he has found 'the kingdom of God'. By 'rich man' the evangelist seems actually to mean the man who is overmastered by his sense of property — Mark's 'trust in riches' instead of 'that have riches' agrees with this, one more reason that the verse is to be considered as a subsequent alteration — and the warning does not go so much against any particular form of ownership, or public office, or dignity, as it does against too much 'happiness in the world'. In general it would seem that Jesus' pity goes out to the rich, the successful and the fortunate even more than to the poor.

So much for the rich, but was it only the exalted soul, then, the man of God, the saint who was to be admitted into the kingdom? Was the great mass of humanity to have no chance either?

There are many passages in which Jesus' indifference to a man's social status, or to his reputation as measured by then current moral standards, is emphatically affirmed. Even as the story of Zachaeus (Luke 19, 1-10) tells us that a rich man can be saved, so other passages treat of the harlot and sinner with as much goodwill; the adulterous woman is certainly no saint, nor is the crucified malefactor who receives the assurance of Paradise.<sup>1</sup>

The famous lines in Matthew 20, 16 seem to settle the question: '... so the last shall be first and the first last: many be called but few chosen.'

This is more than a hint that even the saints have no certainty regarding their pre-eminence in God's grace.

Passages like these illustrate how the original doctrine was shaped to fit social necessities and existing custom, in short, to fit 'the world', and many more examples of this will appear on later pages. As if the resulting obscurities were not enough to complicate the correct understanding of the text, there are also the all-too-numerous textual errors which we owe to the mistakes of copyists and translators.<sup>2</sup> Centuries of research have now successfully identified a great number of these, and serious as they are they still seem relatively harmless compared to the editorial additions, excisions and retouchings.

The result of all these factors working in combination has so impressed some scholars that they have declared the gospels to be hopelessly disfigured. Loisy, for instance, supposes that the original

<sup>1</sup> St Dismas, 'The Good Thief'.

<sup>2</sup> The King James is a translation of the same inferior version used by Erasmus.



gospel — what he calls the Jesus-gospel — was deliberately destroyed in order that his Palestinian story might be rewritten with the Graeco-Roman colouring demanded by the times. These demands included among other things the placation of the pagan authorities and the ability to compete successfully with rival religions such as Mithraism and the Osiris cult.

Other writers of this school would reduce the gospels to the status of myth — fabulous stories adroitly combined with pre-Christian maxims and proverbs which had been circulating in Asia for generations. They point out that the incidents of Jesus' life and death, his teachings, the rites and mysteries of the Christian Church, are all paralleled by similar incidents, ethical formulas and ceremonies in other religions which antedate the birth of Jesus.

'If the gospel record were the only record of a god coming upon earth, of a god born of a virgin, of a god slain by men, that record would seem more plausible ...' Blatchford argues. 'If one god is a myth, another may be a myth.'

Now logic of this kind certainly is fallacious, for we know quite well that there is, and can be, nothing completely new in the realm of religion. If innovation is carried too far, the new element will find itself thrown overboard altogether (see p. 55), a fact the evangelists recognized squarely:

'No man having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.'

(Luke 5, 39)

We have already shown how the new developments in a religion are invariably offshoots from well-established antecedents. Moses, St Francis, Luther, Wesley — all of them made the widest use of pre-existing ideas and what is more important as far as the texts go, they expressed their ideas, old or new, in the old familiar terms; they elaborated a language invented by others. This should not be taken as grounds for doubting the originality of the conceptions they introduced. To make themselves understandable they had to use the material at their disposal, a language that would be understood — not merely the language of words, but also the language of symbols and ideas — 'a language belonging to all' as Albright puts it.

It cannot be denied that words like 'the light', 'the way', 'the truth', and expressions like 'the bread', 'the wine' have been found in older writings. 'The light' had been widely used to designate a teacher and in this sense it can be found in the poetry of early Egypt and of Persia; 'the way' and 'the truth' appear in the Old Testament and again in texts of Babylonian origin; ritual con-

sumption of bread and wine even predates the Passover. These expressions should be regarded as metaphor when they appear in the gospels. The use of metaphor is an effective — and perhaps the only effective — way of communicating complex ideas, ideas which do not lend themselves to direct expression, and have overtones which cannot be grasped intellectually. Metaphor omits the appeal to the intellect, and addresses itself directly to the imagination of the reader.

Already in the third century Plotinus, in his *Enneades*, characterizes the description of various gospel scenes as 'fine images'. He compares them to the Egyptian hieroglyphs which convey thought, not by letters representing sounds but by signs, each of which is in itself a real thing which can be grasped directly. This directness is only attained if one deliberately avoids addressing oneself to the analytical comprehension. This was what Baudelaire had in mind when he said Delacroix's art was great 'because it evokes feelings and ancient poetic thoughts which one has believed were buried irretrievably in the night of the past'.

Such feelings, such poetic thoughts appear in nearly every description the gospels give us. In no case should they be lifted out of context and analysed intellectually. Judas' kiss, far-fetched as it may seem as a gesture to point out a man to the authorities, speaks as a symbol — a symbol understood by everyone.<sup>1</sup> A kiss at such a moment, this sign of love carrying with it the message of death, tells us more of what is really happening — the sort of betrayal this was — than long description could ever do. To see myth in this is as misleading as it is to search for esoteric implications in the agony at Gethsemane or in the spear wound dealt the dying man on the cross. In each one of these cases the narrators were using 'fine images' which because of their universal meaning would tell the story and tell it in a way understandable to all.

And the effect of a style, which uses impressionistic scenes instead of historic narration, takes us even one step further. By stimulating the imagination rather than appealing to the mind, it makes the reader a participant instead of a passive observer. In effect it raises him to the status of an assistant, an explainer; it transforms him into an evangelical thinker, and often, in the end, into an evangelist.

Still certain critics of a literal turn of mind applying a literal minded analysis to the events told in the gospels, have gone so far as to doubt the very historicity of Jesus. The church's orthodox answers and the evidence offered in support of them is dismissed by

<sup>1</sup> See footnote, p. 111.

these as being partial, but science in the person of its best representatives, throws its weight against the sceptics. Deussen<sup>1</sup> who looks at the problem with the objectivity of a historian and philosopher writes:

'Only a fool can doubt the historicity of the man Jesus. The existence of the gospels, the way in which early Christianity developed, would remain inexplicable if we didn't accept a historic Jesus as the cause of the movement.'

A generation after the crucifixion Rome was already moving to repress a cult which had become so formidable that it could plausibly be regarded as a menace to society (pp. 72ff.). Such a faith, one for which hundreds would go joyfully to martyr's deaths — could not have sprung up without the inspiration of a personal leader. History does not show us one single example of such explosive mass-enthusiasm without a man behind it. True, preachers like Peter and Paul persuaded many; they stimulated, they propagated, they converted; but they could hardly have originated a movement whose dynamism was in itself a miracle greater than any of the miracles the apostles claimed for their leader.

Summarizing, we must admit that the texts, considered literally, seem full of improbabilities, exaggerations and inconsistencies; that they include elements of myth and ancient custom; that they plainly show the signs of interpolation and editorial tampering; that they are obviously a compilation of earlier material all of which was once considered inspired, and that they are based in part on older cults and older ethical systems. Nevertheless, even though they cannot be taken as strictly genuine in all respects, it is foolish to maintain that they do not contain a solid core of truth, a record of events and of the teachings of an historical person. Even when it is hardest to disentangle Jesus' words from the thicket of overgrowth, the reader feels that the words are still there and that in many instances at least, they can be rediscovered — 'the hidden treasure' as Origen called it.

In its present form all of the New Testament gives this singular impression of clouded, enigmatic meaning which both irritates and pleases. The impression is of a master work which has been cut up, patched together again, then polished and over-polished by many hands, skilled and unskilled, but which still carries the power of something unique and great. Through the obscuring veils the original Jesus shines forth in such strength that even the most recalcitrant sceptic cannot escape him. And in the confusion of

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit.

ideas, wishes, compromises and sanctions which have found their way into the gospels the unprejudiced student perceives ever more clearly one great leading thought, at once simple and powerful, which is told, repeated and illustrated again and again. Some of these illustrations have been misunderstood through inherent obscurities; others were wilfully misconstrued almost from the beginning.

It is with a few of these misunderstandings that our next section deals.



### PART III





## CHAPTER 4

### Jesus versus Paganism

NOWHERE in the gospels is the anti-pagan intention more clearly in evidence than in the chapters which introduce Jesus' ministry. Like a beacon they stand warning the reader as to what he will find and what he should not expect to find in Jesus' teaching. The devil in tempting Jesus (Matthew 4, 3; Luke 4, 3) challenges him to change stones into bread, and in that single line gives voice to that secret inner wish of every man, the wish which is the true expression of the pagan he is at heart. This wish is the very thing that Jesus rejects so categorically: man does not live by bread alone. In other words, Jesus would have man overcome his primitive instincts and reach out for higher values, values which make man the thing he essentially is. Over and over again this theme is put forward in the gospels. Let man seek and he will find, knock and it will be opened unto him.

But mankind has always refused and still refuses to listen, and the parables, stories and sayings cited in this section illustrate how conventional interpretation combined with editorial changes and intrusions, sought and still seeks to explain away the original meaning and to reintroduce the pagan promises, the magical formula which, *ipso facto*, will eventually allow the devotee — to change stones into bread.

In proof of this let us examine a few of the parables which because of their uncertain meaning are passed over by the average reader.

#### THE INSISTENT WIDOW<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, certainly from the time it first appeared in a written version, this parable acquired a reputation for obscurity. Proof for this is the first verse (Luke 18, 1) or at least that is the best explanation for the existence of this verse which seems to have been inserted as a warning given in advance.

'And he spake a parable unto them to his end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.'

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes called the Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18, 1-8).

This is one of the few instances in which a warning or a 'moral' has been used to introduce a parable. It seems to say that misunderstanding lies in wait, that unless he is on his guard the reader may receive an irreverent or otherwise undesirable impression, and such is undoubtedly the case with regard to this particular parable as we shall see.

The task of uncovering its original meaning is complicated by the fact that the story appears in Luke only, and means of comparison are lacking. One thing, though, can help us. Every author has his own characteristic way of reasoning, of bringing home a point, and the evangelists are no exception. Failure to bear this in mind has led most readers of the parable to unsatisfactory and even shocking misinterpretations.

After verse 1, Luke goes on,

2. ... There was in a city a judge which feared not God, neither regarded man:
3. And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.
4. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;
5. Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.
6. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.
7. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?
8. I tell thee that he will avenge them speedily.

On its face the meaning would seem to be precisely what verse 1 indicates: pray, even when God seems to ignore you. Just as the judge is worn down by the persistence of the widow, you too by dogged perseverance may succeed in wearing down God. It is an idea that is expounded in many theologies and many pulpits, and yet to pray — because persistence in prayer brings *results* — is nothing more than the old pagan practice of using established and standardized techniques to attain one's ends.

Verse 6 can be read to indicate that God is to be compared with the judge in his attitude towards the petitioner, and this is the orthodox reading. The verse breaking in as it does upon the story seems to be inserted here to force the reader to the interpretation already announced in verse 1.

Now such an interpretation, even though superficially satisfactory, is bound to be distasteful. The story appears trivial, vulgar even. God is portrayed as subject to the same impatience and bad temper that afflicts the ordinary human, and the wor-

shipper having been apprised of God's instability is encouraged in the rather vile tactic of playing upon the Lord's weakness. 'Listen to the unjust judge', he is urged. 'In the end he gives the widow what she wanted, so do as she did, and you too will get what you want.'

If, however, we assume that the first editors found that the parable failed to make sense, it is reasonable to assume also that they introduced verse 1, and in all probability recast verses 6-8 in their efforts to provide a plausible meaning. But why then, we may be permitted to wonder, did not these same editors eliminate the parable from the narrative entirely? How could they have hoped that the new form they gave to the parable would strengthen the faith of the congregation, much less ennoble the faith? There can be only one answer. Though they might alter, editors would not eliminate a passage that had been purposefully introduced by the original author. And why then did the original Luke include the parable? It can only have been that for him it had meaning, sound meaning, and one edifying enough to make it worthy of being set alongside the rest of his gospel.

This meaning may still be recovered if we examine Luke's special style and note his propensity for bringing home his point by contrasting argumentation.

To appreciate this Lukan method, observe the following passages and see how Luke goes from the simple to the extreme.

'If then God so clothe the grass which is today in the field, and tomorrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith?'

(Luke 12, 28)

'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.'

(Luke 16, 31)

Such people would never believe in a miracle even if the dead were raised before their very eyes.

A still better example:

'For if they do these things (condemn an innocent man) in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?'

(Luke 23, 31)

In other words, if men are capable of such injustice when all is well with them, what injustice will they not commit when fortune turns against them.

'Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.'

(Luke 23, 40-1)

Again the contrast to show not only the frightfulness of the injustice done to Jesus, but also to show the sublimity of his nature. We in punishment for our deeds must suffer death, but who must this man be who likewise suffers the penalty we suffer and yet has done nothing? Death is our lot, but for him surely something else awaits. That this meaning is the correct one is acknowledged by verse 43 following in which Jesus answers the thief: 'Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.'

Or:

'If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?'

(Luke 11, 13)

Here the contrast becomes very apparent: If you being evil (1), give good things (2) to your children (3), will God who is the personification of Goodness (1), do less (2) for those who ask him (3), his children who stand even in closer relationship to him than your children stand to you? Would he not give what he is always ready to give, the Holy Spirit?

These are random examples of Luke's particular method of exposition, one he employed so often that we find in it the clue to the true explanation of The Insistent Widow. Here we have a wicked judge, a man without sympathy for human misery or interest in justice for its own sake (1). On the other hand we have the petitioner, a widow, which is the same thing as saying one who is poor and without influence (2). Thus the judge has no possible motive for making himself agreeable to her, and as if this were not enough, she makes her case worse by asking not for protection but for 'vengeance' (3). It would seem that her case is lost to begin with, the judge being disinclined to do justice and the woman having no special means to sway him; and yet, in the end, by wearing down the judge, she gets a decision in her favour.

Is it likely, then — Luke argues — that God, the supreme example of justice and charity, the eternally Just Judge (1), will ignore the plea of a petitioner who is his own beloved child (2), especially a plea which is for a wholly righteous end (3)? In such a case there will be no need to wear Him down.

Jesus in this parable is teaching us to trust God, and to have

no fear — for our relationship with God is in complete contrast to that of the heartless judge and the importunate widow. God need not be overwhelmed by insistence. He will hear you — for to him you are his own.<sup>1</sup>

The generally accepted interpretation, however, turns a poetic illustration of God's love into an incitement to pagan mechanism and pagan belief: pray, pray, and your wish will be fulfilled. It is very much like the action of the Tibetan prayer mill which keeps the demons away and at the same time gets you what you want.

A short-sighted but convenient interpretation like this, accepted as orthodox throughout the centuries, degrades the gospel. Yet in the case of certain other parables, interpretations have been generally accepted which are even more harmful, interpretations moreover which owe their acceptance not to the words of commentators and Church Fathers, but to bare-faced tampering with the gospel text in the period before the canon was established. In some instances such interpretations tend to degrade the Deity even more than in the case of the Insistent Widow. In others it is Jesus' character that suffers.

#### THE DISHONEST STEWARD

This is the gist of the story as told in Luke 16, 1-9. A steward is caught in a piece of flagrant dishonesty. Forced by his lord to give an accounting and expecting to be dismissed and cast out of the community, he goes to the various debtors and tells them to alter their accounts by entering smaller amounts than those they actually owe to the lord. In this way he hopes to attain the double result of making his own accounts seem more nearly correct and of having placed his master's debtors under obligation to him thus securing himself against the future.

Luke tells this in his own style:

1. There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods.

<sup>1</sup> Henry J. Cadbury, in *Jesus What Manner of Man* (MacMillan 1947, pp. 18-21), calls attention to the use of the *a fortiori* argument in the gospels and in contemporary rabbinical literature as well, but he does not bring out the extent to which it was used in the gospel of Luke. He explains the general purport of many gospel passages in the following terms at the same time touching lightly on our parable: 'Jesus does not hesitate to infer that what man does God also will do, or will be even more likely to do ... An unjust judge ultimately responds to importunity ... How much more will God care for the requests and needs of his human children!' (p. 21) that is, if these children keep importuning Him. However, if our interpretation of the parable is correct, such importunity should not be necessary.

2. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward.
3. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my Lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.
4. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.
5. So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?
6. And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.
7. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore.
8. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.
9. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

Obviously verses such as these are bound to be difficult. By having Jesus commend the rascally steward, in saying of his abject subterfuge that he has 'done wisely' (for even if 'the lord' in 8a designates 'the rich man', Jesus as the narrator stands behind him), the parable discredits Jesus, and on innumerable occasions it has been used to accomplish just that end (by the emperor Julian for example).

At first sight it is hard to conceive of Jesus telling a story of this variety, much less commending so sly a scheme. The idea of such a machination can only be born in the mind of one well versed in subtle judicial and commercial affairs, in the mind of a sharper. As a result the authenticity of the parable has often been doubted. It has even been supposed that it is a forgery inserted to support the case of bishops who found themselves in trouble over money matters. Even this supposition can hardly stand, however, for had it been intended as a justification for a few all-too-clever bishops, it would certainly have been phrased in less crude fashion.

The only reasonable explanation for the inclusion of such a cryptic tale is to suppose that, as originally told by Jesus, it illustrated some great truth, a truth too subtle to be told in the form of a straight maxim, but a truth that subsequently dropped out of the context leaving what remained in unintelligible form. In their effort to bring sense into the story the early Christian

teachers felt bound to provide a motive for the steward's action in going to the debtors, and hence interpolated verse 4b: 'that they may receive me into their houses'. It is these words which state the steward's logical but highly disreputable purpose in making friends on whom he might fall back in the event his lord should dismiss him.

But take away this 'motive', take away also the concluding 'moral' as told in verse 8,<sup>1</sup> and finally take away verse 9 which may well have been an isolated 'saying' intentionally incorporated here, first to enforce the ugly, money-wise but logical meaning, and secondly to countenance the use of tainted money for church purposes. What is left now becomes relatively simple, even though the absence of the clue lines makes a definitive interpretation impossible now or ever.

What the abridged story would seem to say is this. Both the steward and the debtors are heavily obligated to their lord. When the lord asks the steward (who may well stand for the elder, the priest, the bishop) for his accounts, the latter is in great fear knowing that he has wasted the greater part of the goods entrusted to him. To his surprise, however, he is given a chance to explain his negligence, he is not summarily discharged. Overwhelmed by the lord's forbearance he goes to the debtors (... goes into their houses ...) knowing that they, too, dread the day the lord will ask for an accounting from them. Towards them the steward himself turns comforter and his attitude is about the following:

'If I, a wicked man, find leniency after all my erring, how much greater should be your confidence in the lord since you were never dishonest. The lord being good, you may write down your debt to him.'

This interpretation is in agreement with the gist of many other sayings and parables. All men are God's debtors. From birth they receive every good from God — capacities, health, care — but when God asks for an account of the use of these goods, it appears that they have squandered the greater part of them. The serious

<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that 8b is a paraphrase of a Greek proverb which went something like this: 'An honest man will not be able to compete in energy with a rogue' (*Harvard Theol. Review*, April 1953, by Arnold E. T. Ehrhardt). To support this thesis the author points out that 3a of the same parable, 'to beg I am ashamed', is also a Greek proverb. We must agree that in many parables and blocks of teaching, proverbs or sayings from older texts are used to enforce the 'moral', even though they are often quite inappropriate. The fact that 8b may be a proverb supports the argument that it has been added to the original story with the intention of clarifying its 'meaning'.



deterioration of what must have been a very simple text made the meaning so obscure, that an editor trying to give the story sense inserted verse 4b, only to be followed by a second editor who believed that he was clarifying this now incorrect sense by adding the paraphrased proverb of 8b. Finally still others appended the 'saying' which is verse 9. The intensely practical lesson in 9 could have been of great value in helping the early church to a solution of its financial problems.

The predominant tendency, however, in the manipulation of the parable is the convenient thesis — what worldly wisdom advises you to do is wise also from God's point of view — in other words, it is 'good' in the archaic sense of the word. This is another case of identifying human law with divine command.

Though the clumsy distortions in the Dishonest Steward are most unhappy, the results are still not as deplorable as those which occur in certain other cases where the over-editing shows a relapse into the pagan attitude described in Part I.

The commandment 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' is generally considered to be the very core of Christian doctrine, and yet the most commonly accepted interpretation of this principle is frankly pagan. Love thy neighbour and you will inherit the kingdom; love thy neighbour and the divinity will be bound to 'keep his promise'. Thus loving one's neighbour and the keeping of the commandments becomes the new 'Law', a technique by which all one's wishes may be attained, even salvation.

But did Jesus ever intend this injunction, old as it is (Leviticus 19, 18) to be used in such a way? He cited it as one of the two great commandments (Mark 12, 30-1), but it is difficult to read into the following verses a new 'covenant' replacing the old Mosaic covenant. No promise for reward is given. The scribe who acknowledged to Jesus that these two commandments were the greatest was said to be 'not far from the Kingdom' which is a very different thing from saying that 'if you keep them, you shall inherit the kingdom'.

Neighbourly love seems to be more the natural result of an attitude than its cause. Jesus himself, in his own behaviour, laid little emphasis on neighbourly love. The synoptics do give us instances of his compassion, but they fail to recite one single example of the purely personal kindness we associate with the idea of neighbourly love. Jesus is often brusque, at times even harsh. He is rarely moved to act because of compassion for the people involved. The woman with the haemorrhage is healed without his knowledge, simply by touching his garment.

'And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him,<sup>1</sup> turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes?'

(Mark 5, 30)

and when the woman falls down before him and tells him the truth

'He said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole.'

(Mark 5, 34)

She had been healed without Jesus intending or even knowing of the cure.

Whenever Jesus interests himself in the plight of individuals it is because the situation is one which brings out the message he carries. He heals Jairus' daughter in order to impress and to shame the rulers of the synagogue; his 'Talitha cumi' 'astonishes' the witnesses (Mark 5, 41-2). When he raises Lazarus he does not do it out of compassion, for if compassion and neighbourly love were his motive, he would not have limited his help to the brother of his friends; he would have gone among his 'neighbours' many of whom had certainly suffered similar losses. His neighbourly love, if we can speak of it at all, is rarely concerned with the welfare of any one single man, but rather with the welfare of mankind as a whole. With his cures he illustrates an attitude towards God. We see that in his presence a change takes place in the suffering man; his attitude towards God and perhaps also his attitude towards his own self undergoes a change. Apart from the new, deep, creative faith produced by the miracle of Jesus' presence, the man as an individual is raised in value and significance. It is this fundamental change that works the healing.

#### THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN

A good example is the story of The Syrophoenician Woman which is told in Mark 7, 25-30 and again in Matthew 15, 22-8. Both versions include passages which are among the most disputed in the gospels, and the unvarnished details have offered many difficulties to theologians; but the story's vivid colour gives it such verisimilitude that it belongs with the finest of the gospel tales.

Here, certainly, Jesus' attitude is hardly one of brotherly love. The words which come from his mouth, the unfeeling disregard for a suffering human, is so unlike the gentleness usually associated with his name that it has stunned generations of devoted and tenderhearted Christians. But attempts to dismiss the story as a

<sup>1</sup> See footnotes p. 19 and p. 29.

late insertion or as apocryphal, are doomed to failure. Matthew has taken the text from Mark, which vouches for a very early date, and has shown by his expansion of the latter's version that for him it had a meaning which was important to elaborate. The evidence all points to a story which has come down to us un-mutilated, unaltered in any vital respect.

In Matthew's account (15, 22) Jesus and his disciples are walking along the road that skirts the coasts of Tyre and Sidon when a Canaanitish woman (or according to Mark a Greek woman of Syrophenicia) suddenly accosts him.

'Have pity, O Lord, son of David!' the woman cries, 'My daughter is cruelly sick.'

But Jesus continues on his way giving her not the slightest attention though she follows after him disconsolately pouring out her plaints, her prayers, her tears.

'Send her away,' the disciples urge Jesus, 'for she won't leave off from us.'

And Jesus replies without a backward glance, 'I have not been sent to her, but to the lost sheep of Israel.'

The Gentile woman who should have been discouraged by these words, is undeterred, however. With a few quick steps she darts ahead of Jesus and throws herself down before him in the dust of the road.

'But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

And she said Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.'

(Matthew 15, 26-8)

Contrary to the usual situation in which the greatness is centred in Jesus' person and reactions, we find here that the greatness is in the woman. This is immediately recognized by Jesus — just as a few days later he will recognize the greatness of Mary Magdalene as she sits weeping at his feet. Can this be the reason for having introduced the story into the text?

Exegetes maintain that this marks the shifting of Jesus' attention from the Jews to the Gentiles. According to them Matthew and Mark wish us to see that Jesus, although he was sent primarily to the Jews, now turns away from them and offers his salvation to the other races — an idea which was probably as appealing to

the Gentile congregations of Matthew's time as it is to most readers today, but a theory which fails to take into account the tone of the story.

In the first place, if Matthew were seeking to flatter the Gentiles, he would never have let them hear themselves called 'dogs', nor would he have cared to have them see this woman of theirs feeding on the 'crumbs' which fall from the table prepared for the Jews. In this connection it may be significant also that Luke omitted the story entirely, though he must have found it in Mark. Perhaps Luke was unwilling to risk offending his Gentile congregations.

Furthermore Jesus, at least at the beginning of the story, does not seem concerned with her race or nationality; she is merely a beggarwoman to whom he pays no attention, and when she persists his harsh words seem only partly addressed to her. The colloquy with the woman is in reality a colloquy with himself. In answering her Jesus is also answering questions of wider scope, questions so essential, so subjective, that in somewhat less magnified form they have presented themselves to every man.

Here was another woman asking alms. Should he gratify her? Soothe her sorrows of the moment, and have done with it? Or was this Satan speaking through her mouth, tempting him again to forget the greater goal, to turn the stones into bread, to be satisfied with bringing health and comfort to the suffering humans he met along his way, material help to those who lacked in the here and now, but leaving them spiritually alone?

He rejects this temptation with a finality that recalls the *Retro Satanas* of the mount. His mission is not to give bread to 'the dogs' — a term which in Jesus' time meant those uninstructed in the law, the impure. He is sent to the 'lost sheep', those who have strayed and must be brought back to the fold.

The harshness of this speech is due to his self censure. He has had to repress the easy impulse to be kind, the instinct to offer material help as a substitute for a more difficult, spiritual duty. He turns from her, but then, unexpectedly, come her final words. Her plea has been transformed from a mere appeal for help into a declaration of faith; and we see that the miracle which takes place has not been worked by Jesus' compassion but by his harshness. It takes place in the woman's own heart when she accepts the fact of her low estate, her lack of any valid claim upon him, and still believes that her daughter will be healed if he so wills it.

There is something in this story that recalls to every reader the times when Fate has dealt with him cruelly, when he felt he suffered as Job had suffered. But Job never came to the point when he could say in effect, 'I know I am a dog; I know I am not worthy

of your kindness, but nevertheless let a dog eat the crumbs that fall from the table.' It is the woman's humility, her self-depreciation and the acceptance of a judgment higher than her own that is the acting principle in this unique story. If there could be any doubt about the sort of table that is meant, it is cleared away by Matthew who paraphrases Mark's.

'... the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs ...'  
with the words:

'... the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table ...'

Even though 'masters' is in the plural, the reference is to God's table. The expression appears again in the parable of the Great Supper.

So the Canaanitish woman's plea is fulfilled. The current interpretation makes this fulfilment an act of Christian love, thus embracing the convenient theory that to ask, to pray and to count on God's goodness is enough to insure fulfilment of our wishes — and that nothing else is necessary. This interpretation misses the whole point of the story, that is, that it is the woman herself who has changed, a point Jesus stresses, and that it is this change in her heart that works the miracle.

A moral similar to this one appears again and again in other gospel passages and parables.

#### THE PRODIGAL SON

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15, 11-32), as one instance, also tells the story of a person transformed, and does it even more eloquently. Again the usual interpretation disregards the real point of the episode, conveniently overlooking the verses which offer difficulties to its point of view. Though the parable is beautifully told and has been transmitted in an exceptionally well preserved state, it is still not accepted as it stands. 'The unfair attitude' towards the older son annoys a substantial body of respectable Christians who feel that filial duty and respect should be of the same concern to God as it is to human kind.

A father has two sons, the older a good man who honours and serves his parents, and a younger who is rebellious and disobedient and who presently demands that his father surrender to him his share of the family property.

The bad son departs taking his portion with him, but the day soon comes when he returns empty-handed and heaping reproaches upon himself.

'And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him,

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it: and let us eat, and be merry:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.'

Thus far there is no problem. The father's joy speaks for itself, and what he does to welcome his son seems only a natural way of showing and proving the fullness of his heart. If the elder son were to object to this expansive and somewhat exaggerated celebration, the father might then have reproved him with a few kind words, something like 'Why make such a face? How can it bother you that I am happy at your brother's return? Now come and be merry with us.'

If this had been said, if the story had ended here, there would have been no complaint from anyone, but the second part of the story actually strikes a very different note. The elder son does protest and protests bitterly, and his attitude is stressed so sharply that the reader is left to wonder whether this second part may not be a story in itself, subsequently added to the first, or whether the intended point of the whole parable is not to be found in the protests of the elder son rather than in the joy of the father.

Actually the first of these alternatives can be dismissed. The great weight of critical opinion agrees that the story is a unit and genuine from beginning to end, and the attentive reader of Luke will inevitably share this opinion, for almost without exception those parables which introduce sons or servants do so in order to contrast the attitude of one with the attitude of the other.

This comes out clearly by following the narration:

'Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I



serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.'

Few dutiful sons have been able to appreciate this answer. Quite naturally it excites deep-seated resentment in the hearts of those who eschew riotous living and the company of harlots to spend their days in hard work and submission to authority. It would seem, then, that the stress laid on the elder son's words is intentional, and that it is to these words that one must look for an answer to the meaning of the parable.

One of the son's objections — that his brother having wasted his portion of the family goods has now returned to share in what remains — is met at once by the father's reassurance, 'All that I have is thine'; but this alone is not enough to appease the offended brother. For him the killing of the fatted calf takes the occasion a long step past mere merry-making; his father has never offered him a kid, let alone a calf; there has never been such dancing and music at any celebration for him. This, plus the fact that his father offers him no apology for such extravagant behaviour, that not once does his father acknowledge that he has been the more worthy of the two, indicates beyond all doubt his father's preference for the rascally brother, a preference which one can hardly expect this good son to accept. This is still true even though we share the father's sentiment that the older son should be wise enough to put his personal feelings aside and enjoy himself like the rest.

But granting all this, we still have to ask ourselves why so many words have been devoted to this second part; we feel that the elaboration of an unimportant little family quarrel cannot possibly have been the purpose of the parable. It is obvious that the attitude of the prodigal towards life and its problems is being held up for comparison with the attitude of the older son, and that the killing of the fatted calf is not just a touching example of fatherly weakness, but does in fact signify a very real preference for the prodigal's way.

To do justice to the father we may presume his reasoning to have been something like this: True, my older son has always



obeyed me, but in obeying one who has the right to command him, he has only been serving his own interests, his love being as much love for his security and for my property as for me. The younger son on the other hand, the one who disobeyed and was lost to me, has come back full of remorse and self-reproof. Even though it may be that it was hunger which drove him back, even though he may have intended to take advantage of my love, his feelings for me are of a new kind; he even turns upon himself saying he is unworthy to enter my house. Only by leaving me could he find how to love me as I have loved him, while the other — though he has never left me, never left himself, never 'come to himself' in the way the prodigal has 'come to himself' (Luke 15, 17) — the other in his attachment to me has never gone beyond convenience and his own self-interest.

This is a somewhat unusual attitude in a parent, but scholars have always recognized that the parable has a distinctly anti-conventional tenor. Obedience, whether to the law or to the current moral code, is acknowledged to be meritorious and worthy of reward, but only sincerity and the kind of genuine love which results from a deep inner transformation 'causes joy in heaven'.

The moral, then, is found in the comparison of the two characters. Obedience to God, fulfilment of what we believe His precepts to be, fulfilment of all the codified obligations towards one's neighbour, even the doing of the most exemplary acts of kindness, are not enough if this behaviour is dictated by a reverence for tradition and authority. However, there *is* a true love of neighbour, one that goes beyond the prescriptions of common decency and the prescriptions of piety; there *is* a real *elan* towards God, one, as the parable shows, that springs from inner experience and that leads to the kind of transformation which gives new insight into one's own precarious human condition and new hope in the goodness of God.

In the world's literature the respective merits of the two attitudes have been debated again and again. The virtues of the older son, virtues which though real were not great enough to raise him above rancour and bitterness, have both been defended and questioned. Of all the writers who stigmatize this conventional virtue, it is perhaps Richard Wagner who did it the most aptly:

'To act according to the law is not an act of love, since the latter must of necessity be done by the free will, but an act of egoism which tries to protect and satisfy the self through the law.'<sup>1</sup>

The Church, however, does not share this attitude. For it the

<sup>1</sup> R. Wagner, draft of *Jesus*, a music drama which never saw the light.

elder son's virtues are the Christian virtues, those 'prescribed by Christ'. The prodigal's only merit lies in his repentance; the lost sheep returns to the fold and that is what saves him.

As mentioned in Part I, a distinction between the secular and the Christian virtues has been recognized from the first centuries. Similarly a distinction is drawn between a Christian virtue practised humbly and dutifully, and that same virtue practised in a wordly, independent fashion. Virtues stressed in the gospel, especially those enumerated in the Sermon on the Mount, the 'evangelic' virtues so called, were soon thought of as having special merit, a sacred aura about them. When practised in certain specifically defined ways — the practice might even be accomplished in the privacy of one's innermost life — they took on a quasi-sacramental character which placed them alongside the official sacraments of the church. Even though they could never replace these latter, they were considered to constitute a sort of daily self-anointment, raising one to mystic strength and purity, and thereby highly useful.

Compared to this service-in-Christ any other sort of virtue, be it the finest according to self-ordained standards, was considered of little value. Such was the orthodox opinion, an opinion which is still widely accepted because it is believed to be founded on the gospels. Nevertheless the Prodigal Son seems clearly to reject this view, and certain of the many other passages which contradict this older-son-morality seem to have appeared in the original text for the specific purpose of emphasizing this rejection.

#### THE TWO SONS

Jesus himself — the original Jesus if we may call him that — seems to have had little regard for routine-goodness, for obedience to the letter of the law, or even for obedience to a generally accepted code of morals. A good example of this attitude is found in the parable of Matthew 21, 28-31, even though here again the parable reaches us in a badly damaged form. Matthew has Jesus put the parable to certain Pharisees who have been assailing him in the Temple.

28. A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard.

29. He answered and said, I will not: but afterwards he repented and went.

30. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir; and went not.

31. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the publican and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

Evidently there is no question as to which of these sons did his father's will, since the text clearly states that the first did it and the second did not. The Pharisee's answer, 'The first', is consequently the correct one, and we may safely suppose that Jesus, in the original version, conceded this, and only then went on to bring home the moral of his parable, that is, that the publicans and the harlots may enter the kingdom more easily than the Pharisee who, like the Prodigal's brother, has never left his father's house.

Coming to the parable itself, we see that it analyses the character of two types of man. The first son who refuses to obey, but afterwards does obey, is obviously a man with an independent, sceptical turn of mind; he might be called the cousin of the prodigal, going his own way, following his instincts, but learning through experience and recognizing in the end that his father has been right.

The second son who first says he will obey and then does not, simply fails to understand his own nature. He is not a wilful liar, of course; that would make the parable senseless. He intends to obey, he probably intends it very earnestly, he may even think that he really is doing what his father commands, but actually he follows his instincts — not openly like the first son, but behind a screen. In fact he does none of the things he has undertaken to do. In this he is like the Pharisee who makes great ado about obedience to the law, but never realizes that in his pride, in his concern for detail and in his contempt for others, he himself, though unwittingly, transgresses the spirit of the law he serves.<sup>1</sup> True, the

<sup>1</sup> This is the point stressed in the passage concerning the Corban (Mark 7, 8-13). There Jesus censures the formalism of the Pharisees which 'makes the word of God of none effect', and as an example cites the tradition of the Corban. Corban was the legal provision which made it possible for a son to withdraw his support from parents with whom he had quarrelled. By giving to God the money he would otherwise have given to them, that is by giving the money to the Temple, he was absolved from his obligation towards the parents. Jesus cites this as a way of evading the commandment 'honour thy father and thy mother'.

Learned Jews will always argue that this reproach is unjust. According to them no Pharisee would ever have given the Temple the money required by needy parents unless the parents' conduct had been abominable. But even if we suppose this to be true, Jesus' citation of this rule as an example was justified, for the incorporation into the written code of an arrangement which could only have been intended to cover a few exceptional cases opened the

first son is not a very good example of virtue either. He is openly disobedient, but presently a change is accomplished in him by his growing self-awareness. Thus the parable shows, not that 'any righteous conduct counts with God', which is generally accepted as comprising its whole meaning,<sup>1</sup> but that true righteous conduct springs from a certain inner evolution, a transformation man has to undergo, a work of the soul based on independent action even when that action conflicts with the accepted moral code. Matthew — unfortunately in very cryptic terms once again — supports this thesis by adding the following 'saying' to the parable:

32. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterwards, that ye might believe him.

The publicans and the harlots — like the first son — had begun by disobeying God's law, but then turning upon themselves and recognizing the truth in the Baptist's preaching they repented and 'believed'. They experienced that inner transformation which is so difficult for those who find their answer to all life's problems in blind conformity, for those who hope by conforming to reap the reward due to such obedience.

So much is clear. The rest of verse 32 grows in meaning, as we shall now see, because of its reference to the content of John's preaching. That reference throws a very significant light on the whole of Jesus' teachings.

Again and again it has been argued in critical literature that Jesus' teachings are the outgrowth of the Baptist's doctrine. Even though it is hardly possible to build elaborate theories on the few verses the gospels devoted to the Baptist's preaching, it is plain that Jesus was impressed by John, inspired even, and that it was at the moment of his baptism by John, as Mark relates the facts, that he became conscious of his mission — 'the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon him'.

What little of the Baptist's message that has come down to us always refers to his exhortations to repentance. What else did he preach? What, in fact, was his doctrine? We cannot be sure. Some have thought they saw the Essene in him, but the system of the Essene is itself difficult to deduce. It was esoteric; it required

<sup>1</sup> *The Interpr. Bible*, Matthew, p. 510.

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road for the systematic evasion of God's commandments. Obedience of these commandments is shown to be a matter of the heart and not limited by intellectual legalism.

a noviciate of three years, abstinence from meat, the 'oblation of bread' as Tertullian called it, and an almost monastic asceticism. The Baptist's ways hardly conform to rules like these. He preached openly, he immediately baptized any proselyte who wished it, and he cared so little about dietary restrictions that he even recommended the eating of locusts.<sup>1</sup>

All in all his teachings seem to have been on quite another plane. 'Repent' was the ever-repeated theme, and outworn though such an exhortation may seem to us today, the term as used by him appears to have had a wider meaning for his followers than any sense that Christians would ordinarily give to the word. Apparently repentance meant more than the confession of one's sins and the will to do penance. 'Repent' is the equivalent of the word *poenitentia* in the Vulgate and we owe the sense in which we understand the word to that source. But the *poenitentia* of the Vulgate is itself a bad translation of the Greek word *metanoia* meaning a change of mind. Therefore John's 'repent' is more than an expression of remorse, more than an admission of mistakes. It contains the idea of rebirth, of man recreated, not so much by good words and good acts but by the complete change of his inner being. This change, this rebirth, was symbolized by the baptism which John made an essential part of his teaching. *Metanoia* is the idea that reappears in verse 29 when the first son changes his mind, repents, and does the will of his father. .

As for verse 32, it stresses the importance of John's preaching and the Pharisees' aloof indifference which made them impervious to his words. 'Repent' would mean little to men who were perfect already. Publicans and harlots, however, might well understand such a call, and what is more, they could also understand the deeper implications of the *metanoia* — of the renouncing of a part of the self. Jesus seems to add, in effect, 'even when you Pharisees saw the miracle it worked on these sinners, you still made no effort to understand John's message or the value of his preachings'.

*Metanoia* is an idea that appears and reappears in Jesus' teaching,<sup>2</sup> an idea hard to accept and naturally repugnant to those

<sup>1</sup> What John actually meant by 'locusts' is still debated.

<sup>2</sup> A good example can be found in Luke's story of the ten lepers (Luke 17, 12-19) discussed in part already on p. 92. The concluding 'moral' in verse 19 has led to many a controversy. We are told that of the ten lepers, only one, the Samaritan, thanked God and Jesus, which makes the latter ask: 'Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.'

Does this last verse mean that the others who were healed have been healed

who sought salvation by way of sanctioned techniques or simply through obedience and submission. Naturally this anti-conventional idea of *metanoia* was one of the first ideas to be reversed as cult began to reassert itself in the young church — hence the misleading translation *poenitentia*.

#### JESUS AND THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

In order that we may better understand the parable which, perhaps, sheds more light on the leading theme of the original gospel than any of the others — and is therefore the one most mishandled by the interpreters — we will do well to digress for a moment and consider the figure of Jesus himself.

As mentioned before, biographers have tried again and again to give a rounded portrait in their voluminous 'Lives'. Following a method which has proved successful in describing the lives of great men, the method of placing their character in his natural surroundings and explaining events by bringing out the influences working on him, the authors first describe the surroundings in which Jesus grew up and then try to make the known events of his life develop as naturally and logically as they would in the case of such and such a character placed in such and such a milieu. Yet it invariably happens that these attempts turn out to be unavailing. The Jesus they present always remains different from, and inferior to, the Jesus of the gospels. Albright puts it eloquently:

'In some respects tradition may have idealized, in other respects it just as certainly failed to grasp the true stature of Jesus.'

By presenting Jesus in a setting which purports to be the everyday life of his time — the method used by Renan, the first of the great biographers — the writer inevitably distorts the proportions, for he proceeds to put his greatest emphasis on the factors which would be of greatest importance to an ordinary person even though these same factors were obviously of little importance to a character like Jesus. Thus he promptly diminishes the very character he wants to exalt. As soon as he tries to cope with Jesus' nature by accounting for the events of his life in terms of familiar human experience, by attributing to him our passions and our reactions,

by something other than their faith? The main point of interest in Luke's story (which differs essentially from Mark's, Mark 1, 40-5) is actually to be found in this last confusing line, since here it is shown that faith without recognition and gratitude leaves man inwardly unchanged. Will the healing of the nine others be enduring?



Jesus eludes him, slipping through his fingers like thin air. We have said before and we say it again — only the New Testament establishes a portrait, inimitable and definitive; it is there 'where he lives best' as Bundy puts it. Thus all who have come after Renan have failed in the same way he did.

This impalpability is perhaps the best real clue to Jesus' character. That he should elude our psychology is an inevitable result of the unique relationship that existed between him and his world, a relationship which is hard for us to grasp since we see the world and react to it in ways so different from his. The reasons which drive us to action simply do not exist in him. He has none of our desires; we never see him reach out to improve his position; he rejects wealth and happiness as soon as it is offered him — the rich young man who has sought to join him is put off, the adulterous woman who would prove her gratitude is dismissed with the usual, 'Go in peace'. Nor does he evince any more concern for idealistic goals. He never takes advantage of popular acclaim to build a movement; he does not even care to make proselytes. He shows no satisfaction when accorded personal recognition, nor pain at what anyone else would consider a setback or defeat. We find no trace of such common motives as envy, self-interest, ambition, greed; there is no resentment for personal offences and whenever he condemns or curses, it is never for personal reasons. How, then, can one lay hold on a character who has no wishes and no needs comparable to our own? How can we possibly picture this man as speaking and acting as we do?

Jesus never speaks and acts as we would expect him to do. Whatever he does or says astonishes. His reactions come as a shock even to the reader who has been through the gospels again and again. The most pitiless critic is forced to admit he is fascinated by everything that touches this figure, even by the tiniest events. Jesus never offers proof; consequently he never bores. He despises the success he so badly needs; therefore he worries us. He is careless to the extreme for his own personal welfare and we are concerned for the consequences. When he is received by men of influence, he alienates their sympathy with his violent remarks. His scorn of convention is such that it is bound to create animosity. Though his position in society is weak, he acts with an independence which takes our breath away, and his disdain for danger is far beyond anything we expect from heroes. When De Loosten states that he 'entered the conflict with a royal dignity' we feel that this is at once an understatement and beside the mark. When Mauriac tries to paint us a portrait of tenderness and kindness and extols his charity, we sense immediately that this is a



wrong characterization. Jesus is not sentimental, and that is one of the things we respect most in him. On the other hand he is consistently enigmatic so that even those few words which disappoint leave us to wonder and to muse. There is mystery in acts which ordinarily would be taken as casual, and in those acts which are truly mysterious there is simplicity.

His ways are so far removed from the patterns of day-to-day life that any attempt to appraise him by ordinary standards is doomed to failure, for the trait of character most typical of the rest of us, our concentration on self, is entirely absent in him. He condemns the notion that merit is to be had by addressing prayers to him, or offering him adoration (Luke 6, 46 and Luke 11, 27), and after performing a miracle which might well establish his authority, he rejects the praise of the crowd and withdraws into solitude as if to wash away a blemish.

Psychological descriptions of Buddha, Moses, Mohammed and other prophets are always possible, but between these prophets and Jesus there is a fundamental cleavage. While these others teach, and are first and foremost teachers, Jesus *is* his religion. He lives his ideal so completely that his life is the symbol of this ideal. His demands, therefore, go beyond obedience to prescriptions. Religious service is all right so far as it goes, as are also isolated acts of kindness, meekness and virtue. But what he really asks is more, much more. In his simple way he asks for the maximum, and to understand this and the parable which will be discussed, we must follow him on his journey up to Jerusalem where the parable was spoken at the table of his host, Simon the Pharisee.

There is no agreement in the gospels as to the date of this meeting with Simon or even of the number of visits Jesus made to Jerusalem. Mark, who refers to the supper but does not include the parable, knows of only one journey, the final one. Matthew, similarly, speaks of only one visit to the city and places the evening with Simon shortly before the end, but Luke has his parallel episode occur on another and earlier journey. For various reasons Matthew's version is chronologically the most plausible.

The final journey itself has been the subject of innumerable dissertations. Why did he go to a place where he could be sure he would be ill-received? Why did he enter a city where his fiercest enemies were in power? It is usually presented as a conscious drive towards a goal — like the culminating effort of a runner who sighting the finishing line strains forward to reach it. The divine Jesus, the Saviour, the Redeemer, aware of the necessity of his sacrifice, goes head-erect straight to the place where he knows his execu-

tioner is waiting. For Mark this going to Jerusalem was like a lamb going meekly to the altar.

If, however, we start by weeding out the Messianic material and the tendentious passages dealing with the prophecies, we soon get a very different picture — that of a man without concrete motivation or calculated plan, whose movements are the consequence of forces acting simultaneously from within himself and from the world outside.

If we would come to a closer definition and speak of motives, we can only speculate. Critics generally are in agreement on only one point: that the departure was ill-timed and ill-inspired. To the disciples who tried to dissuade him (Matthew 16, 22; Mark 8, 29-30) — this being the second and last time during his career that they so much as dared offer their advice — his answer was to the effect that he 'had to go'.

Once before he had set out on a journey with danger lurking before him (Luke 13, 33), but this decision to start for Jerusalem, uninvited, unsummoned, and against the advice of his friends, is quite a different case; it stands out as the one great crucial event of this last period, indeed of his entire life. That he should have deliberately put himself in such a position is hard to explain, but it cannot possibly be dismissed unless the historic Jesus is to be dismissed also. The explanations arrived at determine his character, and for that reason both the fathers of the Church and the exegetic scholars of the twentieth century have given it a prominent position in their studies.

Guignebert, a writer who distinguishes himself by his particularly keen and impartial analysis of the material, says: 'We cannot clearly determine what decided him to go to Jerusalem; undoubtedly it was more than the mere wish to celebrate the Passover in the holy city', and he continues that Jesus must have had a premonition of failure, for it is difficult to see, at this stage, how he could have expected anything else.

As a matter of fact, he must have known from what had happened on earlier occasions that he was not a man who achieved success in the usual sense, that is, by converting large masses, by initiating a popular movement. We never get the impression that he was really popular at any time in his life in spite of the efforts of the evangelists to convince us. In fact we could hardly expect him to enjoy anything like real popularity. We have already noted his indifference to convention, his censorious criticism of almost every respected class in society, his challenging manner both in answer and address; his abrupt way of terminating a controversy without the slightest concession to urbanity, of dismissing a zealous

worshipper, of breaking with custom and usage even in the synagogue — the curtness, the harshness when no offence had been offered. All these, the thought they may have kindled the imagination of some and moved the hearts of others, all these were little calculated to turn opinion in his favour. Even if he had been more generally regarded as a teacher or a prophet, how could he, with so little popularity, have expected anything like acceptance much less triumph in Jerusalem?

Another fact which the objective reader will not fail to note — this going to Jerusalem was completely unprepared. Even if an emissary had preceded him to announce his coming, the real preparations, the steps that might have been taken to proclaim his name and establish his authority — steps as indispensable in the world of his time as in our own day — would still have been lacking. Who is this man, people were to ask; by whose authority does he speak thus and act thus?

This lack of planning is apparent on every hand. Still, many scholars maintained, and still maintain in the face of the evidence offered by so many pertinent passages, that his going was a mature project, long considered and carefully plotted. It is unfortunate that the motives advanced by most of these writers are the outgrowth of a concept of Jesus which can hardly be defended, a concept too much in line with the various 'lives', and one which sees him as a socially conscious man, thinking along socially logical lines, and moving towards well-defined social objectives.

This is the sort of argument developed by Loisy when he asserts that Jesus undertook his journey with the purpose of coming face to face with the scholars, the scribes, and engaging with them in the debates and discussions which would crown his work. The unprejudiced reader will certainly doubt this. Is there any evidence that Jesus prepared himself for such an intellectual encounter, much less than he would desire a duel of words such as Hus had with the Council, Hegel with Schopenhauer, Einstein with Tagore? Does he ever make the impression of a jurist, an academician, of 'the wise, the lettered, the skilled disputer' of which 1 Corinthians 1, 20 speaks, and when he finally arrives in Jerusalem, does he not show his disdain for precisely this sort of theoretical, factual argumentation? When in the temple the chief priests and scribes try to draw him into debate by asking him from whom he had received his authority to preach, Jesus instead of using the opportunity to provoke an argument puts them off with a retort which, though clever in itself, is in no way an elucidation of his doctrine.

'And he answered and said unto them, I will also ask you one thing; and answer me:

The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?

And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say

From heaven, he will say, Why then believed ye him not?

But and if we say, Of men, all the people will stone us ...

And they answered, that they could not tell whence it was.

And Jesus said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

(Luke 20, 3-8)<sup>1</sup>

If argumentation had been his object would he not have spoken out before Pilate, or before the Sanhedrin when the situation set itself for just such a debate?

When John Hus goes to Constance, Luther to Worms, when Schopenhauer meets Hegel, or Babeuf is hailed before the Convention, all are well equipped with arguments, with formulas and proofs, and as soon as the moment presents itself they bring these forth and use them. As for Jesus, every phase of his conduct in the city shows that he disdains such action. He does not prepare himself at all. One cannot help recalling his advice to the disciples: never prepare yourselves; God will inspire you and fight at your side (Mark 13, 11; Matthew 10, 19-20).

And for himself he is true to this principle. Whenever he encounters hostile Pharisees, priests or scribes, he answers them in sentences which seem to come from outside this world, with words whose implications reach far beyond the incident itself. His manner is never that of a debater trying to feel out the position of his adversaries. This contradicts Loisy's theory. What really happens in the holy city is that Jesus lets events take their course, or rather that he places himself in one difficult situation after another, just as he has always done. Deliberately he exposes himself to the wrath of that part of the world which is certain to deny him and his message; deliberately he challenges the Adversary he feels in Man, always relying on his own self — his genius we

<sup>1</sup> According to generally accepted opinion this answer implied that his authority came from heaven — as had John's — but it is interesting to note that he may have been stressing a truth of quite another tenor, in fact, that he had no authority at all in any sense they would recognize. Instead of claiming an authority which would have given his words the force of commands, a procedure, incidentally, which would have been both familiar and acceptable to the pagan mentality, he addressed his words to the hearts of his listeners permitting them to accept or reject them as free men acting independently, and not as slaves held in bondage by the authority of the speaker.

would say now — and then giving in acts rather than in words the answer which would be the only, the eternal answer.

Ed. Meyer, of Berlin, who may be considered to voice the opinion of impartial scholarship, has this simple explanation for the decision to go to Jerusalem: 'Far from attempting to flee the opposition that his preaching had aroused, Jesus resolved to face it.'

Yet, if it was his intention to 'face' his opposition, we would expect him to take an explanatory, discursive attitude in addressing the scribes and Pharisees. Instead he taunts, provokes, and challenges this opposition, and though his manner brings his own ideals out in strong relief, it is hardly a method calculated to convince the dissidents and doubters. The wish 'to face his opposition' cannot, therefore, be accepted in its usual sense of being a wish to overcome it.

Another school of commentators approach the problem from an entirely different direction. Albert Schweitzer writes that Jesus went up to Jerusalem because his heart was set on the *parousia*, that is, the coming of the kingdom of God, and that that event could only take place after his death which 'would be the inaugural act of the new morality of the kingdom of God' — this in accordance with the then current belief among the Jews that the Messiah must die before the New Jerusalem could rise.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the impartial reader will naturally protest to this also, arguing again that were it so, Jesus would have acted differently after his arrival in Jerusalem — that he would have deliberately provoked the authorities to arrest him, that he would have proclaimed his Messianism for instance, instead of behaving in such a way that his conviction became the precarious issue it turned out to be — and that considering this wish of his for martyrdom the prospect of death would have been greeted with joy rather than with the agony which made him sweat blood and ask God the Father to take away the cup.

There are thinkers, of course, especially orthodox thinkers, Mauriac among them, who have no difficulty in explaining the journey. For them Jesus goes to Jerusalem because it has been 'decided', and he obeys this decision unquestioningly. In other words, his act fulfils the mystic plan which had been laid out to govern his life on earth.

For those who are satisfied with this explanation the problem ends here. But even those others who summarily reject any argument which relies on a thing like a mystic plan must agree

<sup>1</sup> Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, p. 30. This deed of self-sacrifice 'is the efficient first factor in a chain of transformations the supernatural conclusion of which is his 'coming again' in glory ...'

with Mauriac's opinion in one respect. They must in fact admit that Jesus was acting in accordance with an irresistible inner impulse, the pressure of a destiny which he felt he could never escape. To say with Mauriac that God had decided this development, or that Jesus was acting in accordance with the words of the prophecies, or to go further and say that it was written in the stars, or again that he was only obeying the impulses of his own heart — all these are ways of expressing what is essentially the same thing. Every man is to some extent the architect of his own life, an artist who is trying to realize his own character. To be what one is and to be it in the most expressive way is to obey one's deepest nature. If this holds true in the case of ordinary humans beset on every hand by instincts which make them betray their better selves, how much more will it be true of a being whom we have recognized as free of all the instincts, wishes and ambitions that distract the rest of humanity. If Jesus' mission was to show mankind how to rise above the instincts and 'the world', then it was in Jerusalem that he was most truly himself.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth while noting that up to this point Jesus' teaching had been addressed only to fishermen, shepherds and other village folk. Yet the countryside with its settled and relatively contented population was hardly the spot where he would find his real audience. Jesus' message speaks best to the city with its slums, its dreariness, its crowds of the heavy-laden, its vice and despair. There he could speak to the heart and be really understood, and there later, though the cities were the cities of the Gentiles rather than Jerusalem, Christianity actually took root and sprang to life. What is more, the man who brings truth is as conscious of the challenge of scepticism as he is of the call of the needy. Jesus may have felt he had to come to grips with the irreligiosity of this city so typical of all cities, with the sophisticated urban wisdom which has ever been the enemy of true religion.

The city with its refinements, its hunger for sensation, its manifold escapes and its cruelty had to be the final objective. There he would encounter the most strongly entrenched elements of society, the souls sheltered behind the strongest walls. No matter what his accomplishments might have been up till this moment, his mission could never be complete until he had forced the fight at the point

<sup>1</sup> We may quote William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in this connection. 'I have often thought that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such a moment there is a voice inside which speaks and says 'this is the real me!'



where the resistance was sure to be the most desperate, and where the decisive test was bound to occur.

Jesus must have known what the dangers would be, both to his life and for his mission. Theologians, teachers, writers, those who had the weight of the law and tradition behind them, those who had already gathered a faithful following, would be waiting to unite against him. And alongside these well-trained and resolute elements there would be the jeering, laughing crowd, the easily diverted and easily angered multitude, ready to doom tomorrow what it had hailed today.

And there was still one other great peril — that he might not be heard at all. Prophets were nothing exceptional in Jerusalem, and the citizenry might simply refuse him attention. The municipality already had had to take steps to regulate the doings of its multitude of seers and rabble-rousers, 'prophets of the market-place' as they had come to be called. Prophets were so numerous in Judea that Josephus in his chronicles would hardly think it worth while to mention this newcomer. Jesus was well aware of the dangers such competition entailed — he had already had to pronounce a warning against 'false prophets' (Matthew 7, 15; Luke 21, 8) in passages which are hardly disposed of by declaring them to be glosses of later date — and similarly he could not have been unconscious of his weakness as a comparative unknown. He had no standing outside the little circle of followers who repeated his sayings; no movement had been inspired during his short ministry. Seen in retrospect, his earthly career seems to have been only the prelude to his real career, and his influence on his contemporaries scarcely more than a suggestion of the groundswell that was to follow. To a writer like Josephus, a man interested primarily in actualities, a prophet whose teachings ignored politics and inaugurated no positive action can have been little more than a *fait divers* — and such he must have seemed to the average burgher of Jerusalem.

Some of the words uttered by Jesus before his departure — if we can go by the chronology of the synoptics at all — suggests that he appreciated these dangers and rated them correctly. In these speeches we catch the first notes of a very human sort of weariness and apprehension<sup>1</sup> though naturally enough tradition does not care to recognize the fact. Tradition has always pictured the

<sup>1</sup> This has nothing to do with the predictions of doom which also appear in these same chapters (Matthew 24, 11 to the end of the chapter; Luke 19, 42-4). The predictions can only have been added much later, for the activities of the disciples during Jesus' lifetime clearly show that they were quite unfamiliar with these prophecies which had supposedly been related to them.



journey to Jerusalem as the crowning event in Jesus' life, a moment anxiously expected by the crowd and highly feared by the priesthood, and writers and scholars, consciously or unconsciously have supported this view. Richard Wagner in his 'Jesus' makes him a hero in the Nordic — or more properly in the old-Jewish-style, another Judas Maccabeus or Kokeba. Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly amid the wild acclaim of the crowds, the ass in Wagner's version having somehow been transformed into a snow-white steed. The deeds the hero then performs are all in the same style. Going to the market place he delivers a fiery speech; from there the triumphal progress continues, interrupted only when he pauses to dispose of one or two helpless challengers. Finally as he presents himself at the Temple he takes on the dimensions of a Parsifal, his imprecations rolling like thunder as he drives forth the money-changers.

Wagner evidently conceived Jesus as a bearded man of heavy build, a headstrong and perpetually indignant person, somewhat limited in perspective, who is outraged at any impropriety and is for ever breaking into sarcasms and abuse — in fact, a sort of Luther. For such a person we might reasonably anticipate a career like Luther's, that after long years of strenuous activity and wild contention, he would die peacefully in his bed.

Does the gospel narrative support any of this? In actual fact what we read of the entry into Jerusalem leaves us with the impression of something much less than a triumph. Note how very circumspect the synoptics are on this point. Mark speaks of crowds that cry Hosanna,

'blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord'

and of the spreading of garments in his path and the cutting down of branches from the trees, but a moment later the crowds have faded away and we are told quite simply that Jesus enters Jerusalem and goes to the Temple.

Neither here nor in the few lines Matthew and Luke devote to the scene is it possible to find anything to support the tradition of a triumphal entry in the style accepted by dogma, literature and art. It is true that Matthew (21, 9) speaks of an enthusiastic reception, but he does it in terms which correspond with great exactitude to the Old Testament prophecies describing the entry of the coming Messiah. And yet in the very next verse (21, 10) all the city asks, 'Who is this?' and the multitude answers, 'This is Jesus, the prophet' ... (21, 11). Quite evidently the multitude is the small circle of disciples and followers; the rest of the crowd looks on in mild curiosity.

Luke indicates this even more clearly in his nineteenth chapter. Verse 37 flatly states that it was the disciples alone who rejoiced, and he adds that the uproar provoked a remonstrance from the Pharisees, whereupon the demonstration seems to have ended. The subject is dropped forthwith and a few verses later we are told simply that 'Jesus went to the Temple'.

More even than the synoptic's vagueness on the point, the absence of verses setting forth positive evidentiary material indicates that Jesus was virtually unknown in the city. When the gospels are reduced to their essence by the excision of embellishments and passages which serve for nothing except to echo the prophecies, the impression grows that his presence failed to cause any real sensation during these days preceding the Passover. There is nothing to do but to agree with Guignebert:

'The Jews looked at him with curiosity or indifference, but without following him.'

We also feel the correctness of the reasons given for this indifference:

'To the people he didn't speak the language it expected. He was preaching the inner experience, love for one's neighbour to a people hoping for a battle cry. He didn't ask them to act, but merely to wait in a special moral and religious attitude.'

This, in truth, seems to describe the mood of the populace with fair probability. Furthermore it is the only version which harmonizes with events which have already taken place and events which are about to follow. The gospel accounts make it very clear that the authorities had decided to put him to death *before* he could become a public sensation, before he could rouse a popular movement. And in fact, there was no upheaval to be repressed, no mass-conversion of the kind we hear so much about later in the century at Rome. It was only after his death that he took on the towering stature of the figure we know; it was his destiny not to be recognized in his lifetime, and far from a triumph his days in Jerusalem were only the prelude to tragedy.

Could it have been otherwise? Could he have succeeded? Applied to him the word success seems incongruous. A Jesus winning a religious victory over Judaism, a Jesus universally honoured and obeyed, a leader of men, enthroned in some pontifical chair, head perhaps of an oecumenical congress — would that still be Jesus? Isn't he the man who *had* to fail according to the world's point of view?

The world ceases to be 'the world', and humanity is no longer

human, if Jesus is not the rejected man of Jerusalem, the man no one was able or willing to understand. If he were to be the light, there had to be a shadow. Either he must be defeated, or accept a compromise, and victory on such terms would have been his moral immolation.

His indifference to his prospects of success or failure is even more pronounced in the final chapters of the gospels. To the apostrophe of the priests, 'By what authority doest thou these things', he replies with a counter-question which brings the argument to a halt (see p. 154). After another question he turns in irony on the scribes 'which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the market place' (Mark 12, 38). Finally to Caiaphas' question 'which, then, is the doctrine you preached?' he answers: 'Ask them which heard me.'

(John 18, 19-21)

This is a far cry from 'the argument with the Pharisees' that Loisy and his followers would have had us believe he was seeking. Without exception his replies are non-responsive; he may strike at the intention behind the question but never at the question itself. What is more, these ripostes are never of a nature which would convince an audience of sceptics.

Let us follow him on his first day in Jerusalem.

'He went to the Temple.' That is all that is said, and during the scene which follows there is no mention of the disciples. Are we to take it that he went alone, then? It would seem that we are, and nothing could be more telling. Apparently they left him at this critical hour to go about their own affairs, and their departure under such circumstances sheds new light on their whole attitude towards him.

At this point their master's aims are beyond them. True, they have followed him to Jerusalem, but hesitantly and without real confidence that he will succeed in his mission. Their attitude and the questions they put to him prove that fundamentally they are scarcely more enlightened than the masses who looked at him 'with curiosity but indifference'. They remain with him for mixed reasons, most of all from a feeling of personal attachment, and perhaps also for a more worldly motive.

In their hearts they must still have been hoping that their master would prevail, that in him they were allied with the widely expected liberator, who was sure to be honoured, sure to be followed by all, and that ultimately the indifference of the crowd, the hostility of the intelligentsia, would be transformed to praise

and admiration. Premonitions of failure and the first alarming signs of danger could still be dismissed at this stage as the ugly part of a dream in which everything would eventually work itself out peacefully and happily.

Events soon proved that such was not the case. Their apprehension was to be quickened even more, and we can feel how they in their hearts must have wished that their master was a *different* kind of man — a wish all too commonly the source of tragedy in friendship. Disappointment may have been followed by the feeling that they have been deceived. Here was Jesus continuing to be exactly what he had always been — still talking of the kingdom, but in even more remote terms (Luke 12, 50-3). And now comes a warning,

‘You will be offended because of me’.

(Matthew 26, 31)

When Peter answers with all the old protestations of constancy, Jesus is sceptical. It would be too nearly superhuman for them to remain the same towards one who by all ordinary standards had failed as a leader.

We may speculate that it was only after Jesus had gone from them that the disciples — like the Prodigal — ‘came to themselves’, that it was only after they had experienced their own betrayal that they understood the real meaning of Jesus’ ministry and could impart it to the world.

‘I searched for you outside, and all the time you were within.’

St Augustine

Then, they in their turn would face an unreceptive and callous humanity incurably devoted to paganism; they, in their turn, would know the bitterness of hearing their teaching denied and feel the impact of the greatest of all obstructions to faith — servile adoration and ritualism.

He went to the Temple. We can picture him in the street, alone, separated from his friends, carried along by the noisy, unruly crowd. What was more natural for him than to seek the sanctuary — his home?

Herod’s Temple was a long step from the small village synagogues Jesus had known, these sanctuaries where one could lose oneself for a time in peace and solemn stillness. Here the courts and arcades were the centre of a bustling life, in character very much a part of the town and in fact hardly separated from it. We can picture Jesus entering there, hoping to find God, and perhaps to find himself, and instead coming face to face with too many of

the things which separated man from God. The cleansing of the Temple, which the synoptics depict as an act of impulse, seems to have been his spontaneous protest to this encroachment of materialism upon the sanctuary of the Spirit.

This outburst — certain alienists have maintained that it was the act of an epileptic — this act of violence, with its lack of regard for either popular sentiment or official opinion, accords precisely with what we have found to be his general attitude. Jesus never hesitates to challenge his adversaries or even to taunt them. If he caused 'astonishment and indignation' in the Temple courts, we may believe that it was not so much because of his prophetic fame or the 'thunder of his denunciation' which tradition always associates with the incident, but rather by his strange, lone appearance. The deep impression his action produced<sup>1</sup> can only have been due to the magnetism of his personality which held the crowd at bay and discouraged the temple-wardens from laying hands upon him. This does not mean that his reception was enthusiastic. On the contrary, this sudden apparition, speaking in words that were almost past comprehension, this disturber of the accustomed order acting as no one else would have dared to act, was certain to be unwelcome at any time and even more so on this day devoted to the Passover preparations. His turning off of the perfectly reasonable questions of the priests, his abrupt rejection of their authority to examine his authority, was hardly the way to win the approbation of a crowd which might naturally be expected to side with its elders.

Emerging from the Temple he found himself in the street again. We still hear nothing of the disciples, nothing of followers, old or new. We are only told that he spent the evening 'out of the city' (Mark 11, 19), 'in Bethany' (Matthew 21, 17).

What had the day accomplished? His words, his answers — had they reached the hearts of his hearers? People had listened, then gone their way. If he had met anything that might be called understanding, it had been like a straw fire, kindled among pitifully few persons.

The wavering attention of the many, their never-to-be-satisfied

<sup>1</sup> The fidelity with which the incident has been preserved is evidence of this impression, and vouches for its authenticity. If the impression had been favourable, we would have heard of followers, of a popular uprising, of tumults that had to be crushed. The silence of the gospels in this respect is eloquent enough. But the fact that the incident was preserved also testifies to the prestige Jesus' figure acquired soon after his death. An irreverent act committed by a man of no importance, even though it had been the sensation of the moment, would hardly have remained alive in the memory of the populace.

hunger for quick and easy solutions, had again blunted the effect of his words.

'He perishes before the callousness of the commonplace, the spiritlessness of the sluggish masses. It is the eternal indolence of the human soul that killed him.'

R. von Delius, 1909

#### THE TWO DEBTORS

With the end of the day he is no longer alone. The disciples return, and if we follow Mauriac, who himself follows the commonly accepted chronology, this is the night on which Jesus sups with Simon the Pharisee. Mauriac's description of the evening<sup>1</sup> makes very plausible use of the material.

Simon,<sup>2</sup> who has graciously invited Jesus — some say because he loved him, others because he was curious to know him better and to hear what he had to say — Simon has gathered some of his friends at his house and in their midst he places Jesus and the few disciples who have come with him.

It was not an easy gathering: the strain which had marked other similar occasions was repeated here. When water was offered to the regular guests so that they might wash their hands before eating,<sup>3</sup> the servants passed by Jesus and his friends knowing that in this respect they followed the manners of the sinners and the unenlightened.

The host makes a civil attempt to gloss over the incident, the meal is about to begin when out of the darkness of the room a woman appears. Both Matthew and Mark call her just that, 'a woman'; for Luke she is 'the sinner'; John names her Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and in tradition she is Mary Magdalene. Whoever she may be, she sinks to her knees before Jesus, kissing his feet and 'washing them with her tears'; then she proceeds to anoint them with fine oils and perfumes, and finally to dry them with her hair.

To Simon, who has missed none of this, the thought occurs, 'This man can be no prophet. Else knowing her for the kind of woman she is<sup>4</sup> he would never allow her to do what she is doing.'

But as if to answer this silent reflection, Jesus turns to Simon

<sup>1</sup> Mauriac, *Life of Jesus*, 1937, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> In Mark, Simon the Leper.

<sup>3</sup> The handwashing before meals was a special custom of the Pharisees rather than a prescribed religious practice.

<sup>4</sup> In Jesus' time it was not difficult to recognize a prostitute. Custom had assigned them a distinctive costume and hair arrangement.



and tells him the parable usually known as 'The Two Debtors' (Luke 7, 41-7) which may be rendered in paraphrase:

'A certain creditor had two debtors, one who owed him 500 pence and another who owed him 50. Since neither was able to pay him back, he forgave both debts. Which of them do you think will love him most?'

Simon answered: 'I would say the one to whom he forgave the most.'

And Jesus said: 'You are right,' and pointed to the woman, 'Look at this woman. I am here as your guest and you gave me no water for my feet, but she washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss when I entered<sup>1</sup> but she has kissed my feet. She loved much, wherefore I say unto you ...'

Here we reach the words which have come as such a surprise to the readers of every period, a passage which has puzzled exegetes to the point where some of them have concluded that what follows can only be the result of a misprint.<sup>2</sup> These scholars fear that any other supposition would be open to the charge that Jesus 'talked illogically'. For Jesus does not say: 'She loved much because she has been forgiven much', which would be the logical thing in view of his preceding argument; instead he says: 'She is forgiven much because she has loved much.'

Everyone knows the quips and sarcasms this 'saying' has inspired; but let us consider the scene again. The woman enters, throws herself at Jesus' feet and weeps. Why? Is it because she is grateful, grateful because Jesus has forgiven her? Not at all. At this point nothing has been forgiven her. She isn't even thinking of forgiveness. What she does feel is guilt, her degradation, and what she recognizes in him is perfect purity. From the depths of her defilement she senses his integrity, and that is why she weeps. When Simon watches her with critical eyes, the contrast between her behaviour and his stands out. Simon has seen neither purity nor greatness; in fact, he has seen nothing but the improper behaviour of people at his table. In him there is nothing of the love she feels, and worse yet, he is quite incapable of feeling it, for he feels none of the guilt nor the humility which are indispensable elements in what Jesus calls love.

The conclusion — which followed immediately, without pause to consider the intermediate thought that she loved much because she considered her own sins past forgiveness — is his judgment on

<sup>1</sup> It was the custom to greet distinguished guests with a kiss.

<sup>2</sup> See F. Prat, *Life of Jesus*, Burns & Oates, 4, p. 305.



Simon's heart, for Simon is the man of the parable to whom the smaller debt has been forgiven. Simon, in his selfrighteousness, fails to recognize that there is anything for which he might need forgiveness, but the sinful Mary knows how much she owes, and in consequence it is she who is nearest to God. She, in her repentance, is close to that inner transformation that 'opens heaven's kingdom', while Simon, good but never thinking of God as his creditor, is still far away.

Luke's words of explanation at the end of the parable are not actually of much help.

'To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little,'

(Luke 7, 47)

has bewildered many. By some it is explained as an encouragement to sin, by others as a hint of predestination. It is interesting to note that the obscurity of this aphorism vanishes when we read its first part as 'who thinks that little is forgiven him', or better yet, 'who thinks little is *to be* forgiven him ...' If a man in his vanity believes that he need be forgiven little, he is a hard man within — incapable of much love.

#### THE REJECTED INVITATION<sup>1</sup>

(Matthew 22, 1-14; Luke 14, 16-24)

The contrast between the sinful Mary and the righteous Simon will recall the many similar contrasts cited in other parables which illustrate the relationship of man to God, a relationship in which God is made to appear as the creditor and man as his forgetful debtor. None of them, however, is as stirring — nor as perplexing — as the parable which most scholars would put immediately after that of The Two Debtors.

The Rejected Invitation is, to be sure, a cryptic story. Luke must have been conscious of its difficulties, for in order to bring some clarity out of what otherwise seemed confusion, he grouped the parable with certain other sayings and one other parable, and presented them all as having been told at quite another supper and as occurring on a date which cannot be determined. Matthew, however, assigns his version to the last days in Jerusalem, and this is, as we shall see, both the logical and convincing time and place for it.

Nevertheless, for various reasons we shall here follow the Lucan account, the principal one being that this version is beyond all

<sup>1</sup> Also called The Great Supper.

doubt the one least marred by rearrangements and interpolations of later date. On the other hand we are going to accept Matthew's placing of the locale in Jerusalem. This liberty is not unreasonable since a majority of the more competent biographers have taken the supper in question to be the same one we have described, the one which started out so badly with the uneasy passage between Jesus and his host.

Thanks to this incident, the atmosphere was anything but warm; it is conceivable that the other guests, being men of good breeding, did their best to offset the inauspicious beginning and to mollify their host whose sense of piety had been touched by Jesus' indirect but transparent censure in identifying him with the less commendable of the two debtors.

To set the stage for the telling of our parable, Luke records this speech addressed to Jesus by one of the Pharisees present:

'One of them said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.'

(Luke 14, 15)

Prat in his *Life of Jesus* speculates that this guest, speaking in a sudden access of devotion, may have framed his sentence thus, 'Blessed are those who sit down to the banquet in the kingdom of God.' This paraphrase lays a credible foundation for the parable which is about to be told, for 'banquet' was a term widely used in Jesus' day to indicate the Messianic times to come; the faithful would sit down at the festive table, and that table corresponds logically with Luke's concept of the kingdom of God.

Let us imagine Jesus sitting at this table where he has been so coolly received and where his words have found no echo. Let us also remember the disapproval, the criticism, the hostility he has met during this long first day in the city and let us take into consideration the indifference he had encountered whenever he taught man's dependence on God and the gratitude he ought naturally to feel towards Him. Now he must listen to the pious exclamation of this Pharisean guest who feels towards God no love or gratitude, for whom God is remote and has always been remote, but who nevertheless anticipates the pleasure he will experience when seated at God's banquet table. What is Jesus to do? Instead of answering directly, he breaks in with this parable which speaks of God and God's banquet.

'A certain man once gave a great supper and bade many; And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.

And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.

And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.

And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'

We may assume that these words have brought a hush to the table, and that the narrator's voice sank lower as he continued:

'So that servant came and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.

And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.'

The silence may have been still deeper as he approached the ending of his tale:

'And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and *compel* them to come in, that my house may be filled.'

Such is God's banquet.

Matthew 22, 1-13 introduces certain suggestive variations. He presents it as 'an answer to the Pharisees' leaving the reader in the dark as to the question the Pharisees may have asked. The host in his version becomes a king, the supper a wedding feast, and whereas Luke, except for an explanatory 'moral' ends the story as above, Matthew introduces another character, a man who enters the banquet hall unprepared, lacking a wedding garment. This individual is promptly seized, bound and cast 'into outer darkness'. But except for this ending and two other highly tendentious verses which will be discussed presently, the stories are told in much the same words, and they can only have originated from the same source. Since the whole incident is lacking in Mark, we may assume this source to have been Q.

The Jews, first invited and then rejected, the Gentiles accepted — this is the traditional interpretation, and at first glance, especially in Matthew's version, it may seem to say just that. Again, one may wonder how the Gentile congregations reacted to a Jew who identified them with 'the maimed and the blind', while according the Jews such flattering precedence, but this is a relatively minor difficulty. Theologians have had to grapple with harder problems in attempting to solve the obscurities of the parable, and in their

efforts to make the above-mentioned interpretation stand, they have forced the churches to accept it as a classification of mankind into the following three categories:

(a) The rich and learned — men initially favoured but who nevertheless refuse God's invitation;

(b) The poor and the sick — those whose misery causes God to seek them out in pity;

(c) The simple, the ignorant, savages and the like — those who are incapable of understanding what is good or not good for themselves and who in consequence must be forced to sit down to the banquet, willing or unwilling.

Difficulties remain, however, in both the wording and the sense, for, if God had intended to invite the poor and the palsied at all, would he not have invited them forthwith instead of waiting until the first group had refused him? To this objection no answer has ever been given. Still more difficult is it to imagine God's *compelle entrare* — make them come in — *because* his table is still half empty after the invitation has been extended to the second group, and because apparently God is humiliated by the sight of his empty chairs.

There are students who would get around those difficulties by presuming that the parable is merely a lesson in manners and that Luke's 'certain man' — or 'the king' in Matthew — was intended to represent not God at all, but quite simply a rich man; this rich man is presented as an example of correct behaviour, one whose invitations are not restricted to those whom he should perhaps most like to entertain.

But even so the difficulties are great and many. For the rich man does not invite the second and third groups out of charity or pity. He does it as a last resort, at first half-heartedly and finally in high irritation. In fact the word 'irritated' is clearly indicated, that or 'vexed', or 'disappointed' if one prefers, for disappointment is certainly mixed with anger.

This is a strange example of good behaviour. How can anger be reconciled with an act which is taken to be a generous gesture towards the poor and crippled? Are we asked to believe that there is Christian virtue in receiving the unfortunate out of irritation and spite, and in summoning them under constraint, and in doing these good deeds only after our best friends have refused us?

Still, these same scholars, anxious to support their interpretation in the face of the text, make much of the verses which Luke puts just before the parable. For example:

'... when thou makest a feast call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind ...'

(Luke 14, 13)

Now as far as this fourteenth chapter of Luke is concerned, it is a good example of those instances in which miscellaneous unrelated sayings, traditions and parables have been gathered together and given a certain unity for the sake of continuity or clarity, or to stress the interpretative bias of the particular evangelist.<sup>1</sup> Verses 12-14, however, can hardly be related to the parable itself — in spite of the conscientious effort of one of Luke's editors who introduced the terms 'poor, maimed, lame, blind' in 13 as a parallel to those used in the parable — since the rich man's behaviour turns out to be precisely the opposite of the behaviour these verses commend to us. He first tries to fill his table with his rich friends, the very persons who need him least; only when he sees his table empty does he remember the poor and send his 'servants' for them with the ignoble purpose of filling his empty chairs. This behaviour is scarcely worthy of one who was intended to serve as an example to others, and superfluous for clarifying the instructions of verses 12-14 which are perfectly clear in themselves. The original Luke seems to have ruled out this connection with verse 15:

'And ... one of them said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.'

(Luke 14, 15)

thus separating the parable from verses 13 and 14 which are actually little more than rules of etiquette. By the words 'The kingdom of God' Luke indicates that the host is in fact God and that it is indeed God's banquet that is meant, thereby refuting the supposition that the man referred to is simply a rich man and no more.

Matthew, moreover, in the chapter which he devotes to the parable, knows nothing of the lessons for correct entertainment which the critics have tried to read into Luke. Matthew's 'king' cannot possibly be intended as an earthly ruler, a man. Thus in both Luke and Matthew it is undeniably God's behaviour which is described — the behaviour of a being whom we should love, venerate, and take as the pattern for our conduct. Our original difficulty, therefore, remains in its entirety.

<sup>1</sup> The first part of the chapter deals with instructions governing the Sabbath; verses 8-11 are exhortations to modest conduct; verses 12-14 call for charity and generosity; finally there appears the parable of The Great Supper.

A few writers, evading any attempts at exegesis, refuse to see anything more in the parable than a reference to the feast God promises his elect. Santayana, for one,<sup>1</sup> would have it a feast after death — a poetic thought and vague like most poetic thoughts, acceptable enough as a general concept, but one that does no more justice to the terms of the parable than the countless other explanations that have been produced by twenty centuries of exegetic effort. If this is God's feast, why, for instance, is it so important that the table be filled? Worse still, why should God be pictured in such an unlovable light? Why would Jesus choose to portray his Father as a hard-hearted, narrow-minded, vengeful old man? Does poetry not begin to give out at this point? With the prospect of such a man for a host one can even understand why the first of those invited were so quick to excuse themselves.

The shocking thing about all the foregoing interpretations is the kind of meaning, the quality of thought, they embody, thought which not only lowers the moral level of the whole gospel-teaching and revives the ancient, ever-threatening god of wrath with his 'love me or be damned!', but also puts Jesus as the narrator back into a class with the rude censorious prophets of earlier times.

The word of Jesus should be deep and wide; it can only be deep and wide. If there is neither depth nor width, we may be sure that either the words are not authentic or that our interpretation has been wrong. In the case of this parable the responsibility for its misinterpretation can be put squarely upon the early editors of Luke and Matthew, and upon those of Matthew especially. Both have tampered with the original Q story to suit the convenience of their particular dogmatic theories. In Matthew the distortion is so profound that the story is barely recognizable, and automatically falls into the group of so-called 'Christian stories', passages which were reworked at a relatively late date to serve as a guide to the young church and as a justification for its policies. Certain additions at the end of Luke's version all too obviously serve the same end.

But how can we be sure that the Q story — based on Jesus' own words — differed from what has come down to us? Let us apply a method which often leads to surprising results; by stripping both Matthew and Luke of those passages which are visibly tendentious we may get a very good idea of what the original was like.

Take Matthew's verse 6 for example:

<sup>1</sup> Santayana, *Idea of Christ in the Gospels*, Scribner, 1946, p. 97.



'And the remnant<sup>1</sup> took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them.'

Can there be any doubt that this is a memorial to the sufferings of the apostles and the first martyrs at the hands of the Jews — Stephen, James and the other James perhaps?

Or verse 7:

'But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth; and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers; and burned up their city.'

The city which is burned for its sins can only be Jerusalem which was destroyed in A.D. 70 and is here held up as having suffered this punishment for the rejection of the Christian doctrine.

Then verses 9 and 10:

'Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.'

Here, in this form, one certainly detects a justification for having turned from the Jews to the Gentiles.

Finally from verse 11 to the end:

'... the king saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment. And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

This is the familiar sermon which demands strict conformance under pain of eternal damnation. It echoes so strongly the tendencies of cultic times, when blind obedience was 'good' and disobedience meant doom, that we cannot associate it with the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount.

In spite of its rather primitive morality Matthew's version has been fitted out with a sort of artificial logic, and his editor showed a certain skill in adapting the parable to the needs of the time. Stripped of these encumbrances the parable comes very close to Luke's version. If we bear in mind that Luke's 'certain man' stands for God, that the story stands alone without leaning on Luke's preliminary verses 12-14, and that the logical ending comes with verse 23, we then have what must be a close approximation of the

<sup>1</sup> The remnant of the first invited guests.



original text.<sup>1</sup> Then the explanation becomes apparent, particularly if we recall the circumstances under which the parable was given.

The supper at Simon's offered a setting which naturally suggested such a figure as God's banquet with guests invited but unwilling to attend. If we recall the atmosphere which prevailed around the board; if we accept that this is the evening of Jesus' first day in Jerusalem after a lonely walk to the Temple and indifference encountered on every hand; if we recall finally the cool reception he has received here in Simon's house, the self-righteousness, the aloofness of these Pharisees who refuse to open their hearts to him (and who now more than ever are prepared to reject anything that he may say), we can understand how Jesus might conceive the parable of the Rejected Invitation.

Here, then, is Jesus sitting at a table where no one is willing to accept his gifts, and just at this moment a guest starts speaking of God and of the blessed day when one might sit down at his banquet table. Wasn't the parallel obvious — were not the guests here exactly those who rejected God and his invitation in their daily lives, God with his gifts, God the unknown, the isolated one. And yet they could speak of God's banquet.

God invited all men, all without exception, but those who were closest to him, those like the Pharisees whom he would naturally expect, would not come in. The invitation was theirs and the natural thing was for them to enter and regale themselves, but they had too little time; one had his piece of land, the other his five yoke of oxen, and the third had married a wife. Life, as it was, required their full attention; in any case it was good enough, why change it? So, very much as Jesus himself had done, God turns to the poor — the souls who most need comfort, those 'who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death', and he bids them to the feast. But even these are unwilling; too many of them understand no other consolation than that of material help and so they spurn the invitation. Then, at last, God turns to the hardened sinners. Bitter experience, the burdens of remorse and repentance, compels them to enter — even as Mary Magdalene has done — and so it is that these who are the last to be bidden are the ones who

<sup>1</sup> The unexpected verse 24 —

'For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper' —

in which Jesus suddenly speaks out in the first person, referring to the supper as his own and threatening those who reject the Christian doctrine, is obviously an editorial intrusion.

sit down, albeit reluctantly, to the table which has been disdained by those for whom it was originally set.

That we know nothing certain about the circumstances in which Jesus delivered this parable has already been admitted. No more can we be certain that our version renders his intention truly. But if this is indeed a parable of Jesus', and not merely another intruding 'Christian story', then our version does do justice to Jesus' figure; it also does justice to God's figure by showing Him as the good and merciful Father we have learned to know in the other parables and sayings; and finally it deals justly with the character of mankind in general; man is portrayed as Jesus so frequently pictures him, careless, fickle — and ungrateful.

If it is permissible to speculate further as to Jesus' motive in telling this parable on such an occasion, we may presume that in its opening lines he is indeed alluding to the things he has come to offer,

'A certain man made a great supper, and bade many ...'

Then, a moment later he is referring to his own rejection, his isolation. As the allegory deepens, he again offers them God as he had done so many times before, presenting to them a picture of God, of God experiencing man, God with all his mercy and bounty, spurned, rejected and left to sit alone at the empty table upon which rest the treasures he had set out for his children.

For what Jesus teaches is God. He teaches with a knowledge gained neither from reflection nor deduction, neither from some indirectly obtained conviction nor from a momentary enlightenment, but rather from a constant, immediate awareness such as a son might have of the father he knows and has always known, a relationship which goes beyond worship, adoration or a self-imposed discipline. It differs in kind from anything like that nearness which a privileged few have claimed to experience from time to time. His words testify to what he knows, to what he knows through his senses. It is as if he saw the Father with his eyes, God being most literally 'with him', God being as much a presence as the physical world is a presence for the rest of us. He loves the Father with a love that fills him completely, a love which can according to his testimony not only change the face of a man's life, but even change the face of the world, a love which would, if man knew God as he knows God, far transcend the limits of the love that can be felt for any human relative —

'And call none your father upon earth, for one is your Father who is in heaven.'

(Matthew 23, 9)

It is this ever-present awareness of the Father and the belief in His unlimited goodness that shines forth in every word of Jesus, in all his parables and in all his acts, and sends him forward, undaunted, secure in the thought that whatever comes will have come from Him, and that what comes from Him can only be good. Even when the event seems bad, it is still accepted with joy since it comes from Him — a thought which cannot be unfamiliar to anyone who has ever loved.

What Jesus teaches is this love of the Father and its consequences. Yet never does he proclaim that this in itself is a new teaching; again and again he cites scriptures to support what for him is clear beyond all doubt — the idea of God as the great friend, a conception which lies at the foundation of all truly religious feeling.

Actually this overwhelming love for the Almighty had been felt before and had been expressed in earlier times in immortal words, like those of Job 19, 25-27:

'For I know that my redeemer liveth And that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;  
And after my skin has been fallen, and the worms have destroyed my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:  
I shall see him for myself; mine eyes shall behold him and not another's; my reins are consumed with impatience within me.'  
(Translation after Renan)

But Job's credo never goes beyond the point of hope and longing. It never draws conclusions concerning life as it ought to be lived; he never tries to discover the fundamental cause of his tragic conflict with God; he never searches for it in his own dual nature. Jesus' concept is an innovation in religious history in so far as it shows the transforming consequence of this 'love' on human life, a consequence which he tries to explain, illustrate and impress on his listeners in all his acts and in dozens of examples, maxims and parables. Even though it may have existed in the best of the Jewish Pharisees, with them this 'love' stood separated from actual life, influencing it only indirectly, by softening the instincts, by imposing obedience to commandments, by commending charity and general social decency; it never took the central place it did in Jesus' preaching. Elevated as their doctrine may have been, the Pharisees' actual practice was of this world; they never let themselves forget the practical necessities of life, they never ceased to feel the need for the ceremonialism, the cultic side of the popular religion.

No wonder, then, that 'interpretation' of Jesus' words and parables should have set in almost immediately after his death, or that its first effect should have been to distort the meaning and bury it under a wealth of doctrine. Often it was nothing more than the pious attempts of overzealous churchmen to bring teachings unpalatable to the average worshipper into line with more familiar religious principles. Jesus himself seems to have foreseen this development.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his ministry he was continually at war with the opposition thrown up against him by the custodians of the Law, an opposition which is too often represented in the gospels as petty jealousy, but which was basically the same opposition 'the world' always throws up against any disturbance of the existing order. Certain of his words prove how conscious he was of the latent menace to true religion which is always present in ritual and traditionalism. The 'hypocrisy' with which he so often brands his adversaries concerns not so much their ostentation, their pretence to godliness — the wearing of 'long clothing' and their 'salutations' (Mark 12, 39-40) — but even more their belief that what they were doing was inevitably right, their belief that 'love' could be dispensed with in favour of the systematic practice of good works. When we read the modern interpretations set forth in so many commentaries we can better understand the discouragement he must have known when he saw how humanity received his message.

'To be kind,' writes Grandmaison<sup>2</sup> (we may take the officially sanctioned views of this able writer as representative of modern Christian apologetics) 'to be kind is certainly in our interest, for the measure we give to others is precisely that which God will apply to us'. And from this he goes on to the very logical conclusion: 'Let us give then, and it will be given us.' This is his interpretation of Luke 6, 38, which reads:

'Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.'

But can one mistake the intention behind such a verse? Like grain pressed and shaken down into the measure so generously

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7, 22-3: 'Many will say ... Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.'

<sup>2</sup> L. de Grandmaison, *Jesus Christ*, Sheed & Ward, 1930, p. 88.

that it spills over, rewards shall be poured into your lap.<sup>1</sup> Does not this say that for what you have given you will indeed be recompensed, though perhaps in values of another and higher kind, but in any case so abundantly that you will never have occasion to regret your generosity? That these goods you receive need not be material goods, or even the gratitude or love of the beneficiary, will be evident to the reader who catches the spirit of verses such as these, but Grandmaison takes it in the literal, mercenary sense — that God will requite you for the benefits you have conferred on others.

For those who find such a promise too materialistic, he adds another and more appealing argument for good works, namely that there is another and sovereign incentive, the devotee's love for the Master. The first impression is of words that echo Jesus' own words, but no — let us see of what this 'love for the master' consists, let us see how and why it should be applied. Grandmaison explains it in these terms: we must do good to the poor, for 'what we do to the poor, we do to Jesus himself.' In other words, if we give these alms in the Lord's name, the result can only be to our benefit; we may be absolutely sure that Jesus will never leave our gifts unanswered. Thus 'love for the master' is converted into a ritualistic act with all its usual implications and promises of personal reward.

This same selfish refrain runs through nearly every interpretation offered by the other apologists. 'Explanations' in this vein of verses whose meaning would otherwise appear to be self-evident are particularly shocking when they are made to apply to passages in which confidence in the Father is expressed in words as genuine as words can be. Take Matthew 25, 34-6 as an example:

'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me meat, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and ye took me in.

Naked and you clothed me, I was sick and ye visited me; I was in prison and ye came unto me.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Shall men give into your bosom' is rendered by Goodspeed 'shall be poured into your lap'.

<sup>2</sup> The Testament of Joseph, an apocryphal work, acknowledges Joseph's debt to the Father in similar words 'I was taken into captivity, and His strong hand succoured me; I was beset with hunger, and the Lord himself nourished me; I was alone, and God comforted me; I was sick, and the Lord visited me, I was in prison, and my God showed favour unto me; in bonds, and He released me; ...' Testament of Joseph, 1, 9-15.

In paraphrasing these lines, Matthew seems to be saying that it is not Joseph alone who receives these comforts from the Father, that every human may be a Joseph in this respect.

Here love and confidence are the only incentives, and when a little further on Matthew continues with:

'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,'

(Matthew 25, 40)

charity is extolled in a very different spirit from that displayed by Grandmaison and his school. The love which speaks in these lines is quite another sentiment from that so-called 'love' which is in fact nothing more than self-love.

These lines exhale another spirit, teach another gospel than that of Grandmaison, one that may be translated: 'If you would pay honour to God, help those who have come out less fortunately in the game of life than you yourself; how better can you show your attachment to God who needs nothing for himself?'

God gives, but God needs nothing for himself. This is very much the implication of the verses that follow those quoted above:

'Lord, when did we see Thee hungry and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

And when did we see thee a stranger and took thee in? or naked and covered thee?

When did we see thee sick, or in prison, and came to thee?'

(Matthew 25, 37-40)

This love of Jesus for the Father, a love which breathes in all his words and works, and which he tried so constantly to communicate, to share, proved to be uncommunicable, 'unsharable' — and hence, as the basis of a religion the most difficult doctrine ever propagated.

#### SOME CONCLUSIONS

Before venturing any practical conclusion as to what Jesus himself may have been envisioning in his teachings of 'love', we must do justice to those scholars who have recognized that the quintessence of Jesus' teaching is not a covenant, not commandments replacing old commandments, not a thing of the intellect, but an emotion.

Sabatier writes, 'Jesus was aware that he knew and loved God in a better and a higher way than did any of those who were round about him' but after that he goes on to demonstrate that Jesus' views in matters of religion were incompatible with those of



the people of his time or our own. This writer fails to come to other than negative conclusions.

Ruskin, who regarded himself as a prophet, a being floating between earth and heaven and as such especially appointed to expound the scriptures,<sup>1</sup> rejected dogma in its entirety (the tradition of the Fall, the scheme of the Redemption, eternal punishment and eternal life). According to him the principles of orthodox Christian doctrine obscured Jesus' fundamental idea. All a man needed was to feel a personal relationship with God. This awareness brought happiness as well as the benefit of direct guidance by 'a Personal Deity'.

Against these and similar views Carl Barth raises stern objection. He denies that Jesus ever preached any such return to childlike naturalism; the world is not a paradise and cannot be made into a paradise. To believe that man finds all the religion he needs in his own changing impressions is much too optimistic, and it is wrong to conceive Jesus' 'love' in such terms. Barth interprets Jesus' message as one of strict duty, duty towards the 'poor Lazarus'<sup>2</sup> who according to this author symbolizes Christ himself. Christ, in the form of a fellow with needs spiritual or material, stands at the door and knocks, waiting for our charity.

Actually, it is impossible to reduce Jesus' teaching to the mere promise of 'a happiness in the feeling of God's presence', but we may, nevertheless, be quite sure that the basis of Jesus' teaching is the love of God — and only the love of God — and that this in itself is sufficient, given the right conditions, not only to give comfort and happiness, but to effect the revolutionary change in the individual which Jesus demanded. This change is quite enough to serve as the basis of a religion.

Before he proceeds to the exposition of his gospel, Jesus tells his listeners that his 'yoke is light', that the tidings are easy, that they contain none of the burdensome elements of the old covenant — that he has come to relieve mankind from the grim duty of sacrifice and ritual, the heavy task God had laid upon its shoulders. He had come to take away fear and along with fear the concept of being in servitude to exacting, vengeful divinities, the concept that had estranged man from the Father, led him astray and 'clouded the way to heaven' (Petrarch). God is our friend; yes, but better than a friend. His first gesture is to offer us gifts, to invite us to his feast, his banquet where there are places for all. There one may taste joy surpassing all earthly joy; the draught one drinks is living water which quenches thirst completely and

<sup>1</sup> Ruskin is said to have identified himself with St Francis.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Barth, *Der Römer Brief*.



forever; the fulfilment of one's wishes leaves neither yearning nor remorse since these wishes reach outside and beyond the mortal self.

Luke 11, 9-13 and Matthew 7, 7-11 depict the bounty and goodness of the Almighty in practically identical words:

'Ask, and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

For everyone that asketh receiveth and he that seeketh findeth and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Or what man is there of you whom if his son ask bread will give him a stone?

Or if he ask a fish, will give him a serpent?

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

(Matthew 7, 7-11)

Such teaching — is it really teaching in any familiar sense, or is it simply a poetic appeal — such teaching was hardly calculated to satisfy the self-centered masses who in their struggle to achieve comfort and position were seeking most of all to learn 'what they might do for themselves', what was to be considered 'good' and what secret would be imparted to help them obtain the things they coveted — prosperity, health and life everlasting. What they wanted to be taught were prescriptions — words to pronounce, acts to perform, offerings to be made — which would redeem them from the consequences of their greed. And Matthew, or an editor of Matthew, knowing full well the soul of his congregations, deferred to practical expediency by adding this moralistic inversion of the Golden Rule:

'Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you do even so to them: for this is the Law and the prophets.'

Again 'the Law', and the authority behind the Law, 'the prophets'.

Jesus seems to have accepted obedience to the Law as an almost self-evident necessity placing it on the same level with acts of propriety or good manners. One had to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, but just that and no more. The ten lepers he had cured must observe the requirements of the Law, but it was their faith, not their observances, that had healed them — and the lack of feeling for true religion on the part of nine of the ten is denounced.

This is only one of many instances in which Jesus affirms man's obligations towards society, but it is also true that in nearly every

case he treats these obligations with a certain disdain. The adulterous woman is protected while the deceived husband is ignored; the prostitute is praised but the respectable wife appears nowhere. For Martha there is only reproof and her industry is never mentioned. So, too, with the remonstrances of the prodigal's brother which are treated with an impatience bordering on contempt. All in all, Jesus seems to regard society as if it were like a difficult and demanding old gentleman to whom one gives his due but always with the reservation 'I have more important matters to tend to ...'

For Jesus, then, all obedience to social and religious law is secondary; it is as if he had not come to talk of *that*. In the Sermon on the Mount he alludes to the dangers inherent in too strict observance, and in almost the same breath sets out an ethic of his own which would, if taken as commandments to be carried out to the letter, result in social chaos. However, the Sermon was not intended as a code of social behaviour. Jesus is little concerned with the social order as such, neither with that, with a proper economy, nor with the legalistic sort of justice. 'I have not come to judge between brothers', he says, and it is for the respectable, the wealthy, those caught in the struggle for worldly success that his greatest pity goes rather than to the poor and the hungry. The Law, if regarded as a means of self-sanctification, becomes an idol which makes man hard, cruel and intolerant, and the expectation of reward for strict observance of the Law is the 'human', or shall we say the 'animal', element in a man's religion.

However, the tendency to reshape Jesus' teaching into a dogmatic system has been continuous ever since the time of the evangelists. Such a system could be very effectively combined with what was really a self-righteous, God-rejecting life. Confidence in God, love of God — this alone was too indefinite, or rather, its implications were too far-reaching, unless one could be content with Ruskin's over-simplified solution. If it had to be 'love', it would be a love which expressed itself in alms-giving and devotional offerings; and as for confidence, confidence could better be replaced by veneration, submission, propitiation. Regulations laid down paragraph by paragraph, credos, articles of faith, these were the things they knew, things for people whose emotions were absorbed in their own private affairs but still wished to obtain divine protection, aid and absolution. As a result 'interpretation' was soon at work translating Jesus' extreme 'demands' into what we now accept as Christian virtue and orthodoxy.

Even though we cannot point to one single event which proves that Jesus' message was understood during his lifetime, even

though there are signs that his immediate followers were responsible for the first dilution of his teachings, the real and fatal misunderstanding only came later when contact with his personality had been lost and professionals had taken possession of his words. After that it is but one step to Augustine and another from Augustine to Grandmaison.

The latter in his voluminous *Jesus Christ* sends up a cloud to chill any Christian whose reading of the gospels might tempt him to take the love of God as his main directive. This author admonishes us to take precise and conscientious heed of the scriptures. He does it with the warning that 'external worship and rite when approved by revelation become venerable and must be punctiliously and faithfully carried out', and to support this view, which to our ears may sound somewhat pre-Christian he quotes Matthew 5, 19 in which Jesus says that he comes not to destroy the law but to fulfil it, insisting that every word of the law stands and none of the commandments shall be broken.

No interpretation of a 'saying' could be more telling. Although the significance of these verses shines out clearly — Jesus stating that he has come to 'fulfil' the law, that is, to fulfil its spirit and fulfil it truly — Grandmaison makes it appear that these words mean that the letter of the law regulating external worship and rite is of paramount importance to God. This not only debases the meaning of these lines but uses them as a means to debase the rest of the teaching. What Moses had taught — the recognition of the Father above all else — and what Moses had put into commandments suited to the culture of his primitive flock, Jesus came to teach again, to fulfil — in the sense of exalting the idea of the fatherhood of God and of transforming servile submission and fear into trust and affection. Where Moses had said 'Love God above all', Jesus went a step further, telling us that God in turn loves his children, that God gives them unending proofs of his love, that they may put all their confidence in him, and that when they learn to accept his acts, even though these acts may not always be comprehensible or to their liking, they will have actually learned to love him — thus doing without constraint what Moses requires by commandment.

But how could man feel safe; how could he be sure that he had done enough, especially that he had done the right thing? Soon, very soon, and in a manner more radical than anything attempted by Moses' followers, theologians were at work redefining man's relationship to God in terms of practical devotions and disciplines which would serve as convenient substitutes for a spiritual elevation so difficult for the average man. These venerable eccle-

siastics who took it upon themselves to care for the souls of mankind insist, like Grandmaison, that:

'the true way is to pray to the Lord very humbly, with recollection, and in secret,'

This is man's plain duty, just as it is his duty never to forget that man must serve. And in proof of this duty to serve, a duty which must also be performed very humbly, Grandmaison cites the parable told in Luke 17, 7-9:

'But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?

And will not rather say unto him Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken, and afterwards thou shalt eat and drink?

Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.'

Were the story to end at this point, it might be perfectly correct to interpret it as does Grandmaison in the old ritualistic way which says, 'We must serve and serve humbly. We must be good servants.'

But actually it is the next verse that brings out the point of the story, and a very different point it is from the one that Grandmaison would make.

'So likewise, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do.'

In other words, even if you serve God, even if you do the good, even if you give to the best of your ability, are you going to think you have done God a service — that for this service you deserve credit, reward?

Does a mother think in terms of service when she tends her child? Or a son who helps his invalid father? Between members of a family, between persons no-matter-who, if they regard each other with real affection, there can be no thought of service. To Grandmaison, however, the reward will come when the service is done 'humbly', and the humble servant may expect full recompense in the hereafter for all the ills he takes upon himself here and now.

It is our misfortune that the world did not leave it to modern times and modern writers to introduce the pagan spirit

into Jesus' teachings, or to reinstate a covenant based on selfish benefits in a religion whose whole principle was the denial of self. The evangelists, and Matthew especially, as we have seen in his handling of the parables, were themselves guilty on this score, for already in their works we find rules and regulations being laid down on the authority of the prophecies or of categorical statements attributed to Jesus who now more and more is made to appear as 'the Lord'. These rules, presented as having been ordained by divinity itself, are replete with promises and threats, some expressed and some implied, of rich rewards for the observant and 'outer darkness' for those who disobey.

Very probably, however, Jesus never established rules. For him the love of God for his children implied the children's love for the Father, a love which made mankind secure and hence released all that human energy which would otherwise have had to be concentrated on the self. Many passages which tradition accepts as rules are in fact illustrations of the conduct, manners and acts of a hypothetical man who understands his gospel and has accepted 'the Father's invitation'. Matthew, for instance, sets forth some of the ways in which such a man would practice charity, that is, without ostentation and without trying to obtain selfish benefits in return:

'Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.'

which is to say, that the good they do is merely an act of trade, tit for tat. Therefore the verse continues:

'But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; that thine alms may be in secret.'

(Matthew 6, 2-4)

'The left hand' (that is, the heart) not knowing what 'the right hand' (the acting agent) has done is a vivid image of a good act done for good alone. But the next section of this verse mars the noble intention.

'... thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.'

Evidently this addition is a concession to expediency. The editor of Matthew knew his world and was ready to admit that without promise of reward there would be no charity at all.

Luke's gospel is no more free than Matthew's from these

occasional relapses into paganism. The fourteenth chapter which teaches the charitable act at first shows a noble disdain for rewards:

'When thou maketh a dinner ... call not thy friends nor thy brethren ... nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid you again, and a recompense be made thee.'

(Luke 14, 12)

The idea that there is merit in a gift made with hope of compensation is here definitely rejected, and in the next verse the disinterested act is once again commended:

'But when thou maketh a feast, call the poor, the maimed ... and thou shalt be blessed, for they cannot recompense thee ...'

(Luke 14, 14)

'To be blessed' in this context does not seem to convey the promise of reward but rather to stand for being good in the way God himself is good. It is only in the next line that the reward to satisfy the human soul is specified:

'... for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.'

(Luke 14, 14)

The first verses tell us that the kindness, the unselfish impulse behind the act is more important than the act itself, that this impulse is proof that one is 'blessed' and that 'being blessed' inevitably leads to acts like these. This cannot possibly be brought into harmony with the concluding lines where practical results alone are stressed.

Every chapter, every example in the gospels lauds the impulsive act of charity, the act resulting from a state of mind rather than from calculated motives, and sets it in contrast to the 'good' acts of the Pharisees.<sup>1</sup> We recall Luke's comparison of the widow's mite with the large but too-well-measured offering of the rich Pharisee, and the moving lines which conclude the passage:

'but she of her want cast in all that she had, even all her living.'

(Mark 12, 41-4 or Luke 21, 1-4)

This and many other verses describe beyond possibility of mistake the one worthy incentive for action. In some lines it is as if divinity were speaking:

<sup>1</sup> Suppose one follows the precept of Matthew 5, 40: 'And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke (sic) also.' Such an act would be an absurdity if it were followed by regret, or undertaken for any motive of self-interest.



'... do good ... hoping for nothing ... for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.'

(Luke 6, 35)

a verse which contends that the only motive for doing good should be the desire to act according to the example God himself is constantly giving us.

'Be ye therefore merciful as your Father also is merciful.'

(Luke 6, 36)

He who loves God will inevitably try to follow his way, just as one will instinctively imitate, and as nearly as possible make oneself like, the being one cherishes and admires.

And so most of the so-called 'precepts' regarding behaviour and moral attitude should be understood, not as rules, but as illustrations of the ways of a man whose heart has been filled with that confidence and love of the Father which the evangelists are hoping to inspire in their audience. Confidence of this sort gives its possessor the inner wealth and sense of security which permits him to be indifferent to material success and reward. Such a man, in his most ideal realization, will of necessity be exempt from the meanness of ordinary men.

That is why one famous nineteenth-century wit was able to say that the whole evangelic teaching could be crystallized in one maxim. 'Be a gentleman.' Superficially there is something to be said for this. Many of the 'precepts and counsels' could serve as a practical guide to anyone who would act as a gentleman would act — that is, like a man who was above need in any sense whatsoever, and who would, therefore, be above greed, envy, anger and injustice, above the lust of power, the hardness of heart and all those other distasteful characteristics which go inevitably with unsatisfied wishes and cause man to act ignobly. The admonition 'Be a gentleman' could be rendered 'act *as if* you were rich, *as if* you were in power, *as if* you possessed all the things you needed and wished, *as if* all vain ambitions had been eradicated from your heart'; for, from your individual viewpoint, the difference between possessing everything and being poor but despising everything is very small indeed.

In such a case both prince and pauper will act with the dignity of gentleman. Neither will ever seek to make an impression or put himself forward; they will be indifferent to success and be without incentive to commit misdeeds; they will not be tempted to violence, either in act or thought; they will try to be at their best always, not because they fear disapproval or seek approval of



their neighbours, or of the mighty, or even of God himself, but because that is what accords with their own standards. They will even be fair to those who insult them (as in Matthew 5, 23-24), give to those who apply to them, help those who would borrow (as in Matthew 5, 42) and in general act very much like the man who conforms to the examples of good behaviour given in the gospels.

Certainly a great part of the 'precepts and advice' could be covered by that one principle 'Act nobly', yet in another and perhaps essential way, the teaching goes beyond anything one could possibly include under the head of acting 'like a gentleman'. In too many cases the gentleman, even the one most conscious of his standards, tends to act inadequately or negatively. Few of them would do as Peter did when still smarting under the shame of his denial he came forward after Jesus' death to demand of others a strength of spirit he himself had not possessed. The reason for this lies in the difference between the feeling which moves the one and the other to act. Acting like a gentlemen springs from a feeling of propriety which in its turn stems from good breeding, good taste and a set of ethical principles. The standard which Jesus requires and which Peter automatically adopts is noble without intention to be noble. It springs from strong emotions, remorse, love, gratitude, or a mixture of all of these, emotions which are inspiring enough, if real, constant, and full, to take the place of all lawbooks and all moralities. While a gentleman will try to emulate the finest examples to be found in his world or in his imagination, Jesus asks his followers to emulate God:

'Love your enemies ... and pray for them which persecute you that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: who maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth his rain on the just and on the unjust.'

(Matthew 5, 44-5)

The reason these followers should be kind to their enemies is not a reason involving good behaviour, or good morals, or obedience. Whoever loves the Father will necessarily have integrity; he will not offend him, nor be unworthy of the trust placed in him; he will not disgrace the qualities he has received. He will even try more.

'Be you therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'

(Matthew 5, 48)

That is all he asks.



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